COLLEGE PREVIEW

Baseball America

DOUBLE ISSUE

Star shortstop **Roch Cholowsky** powers preseason No. 1 UCLA

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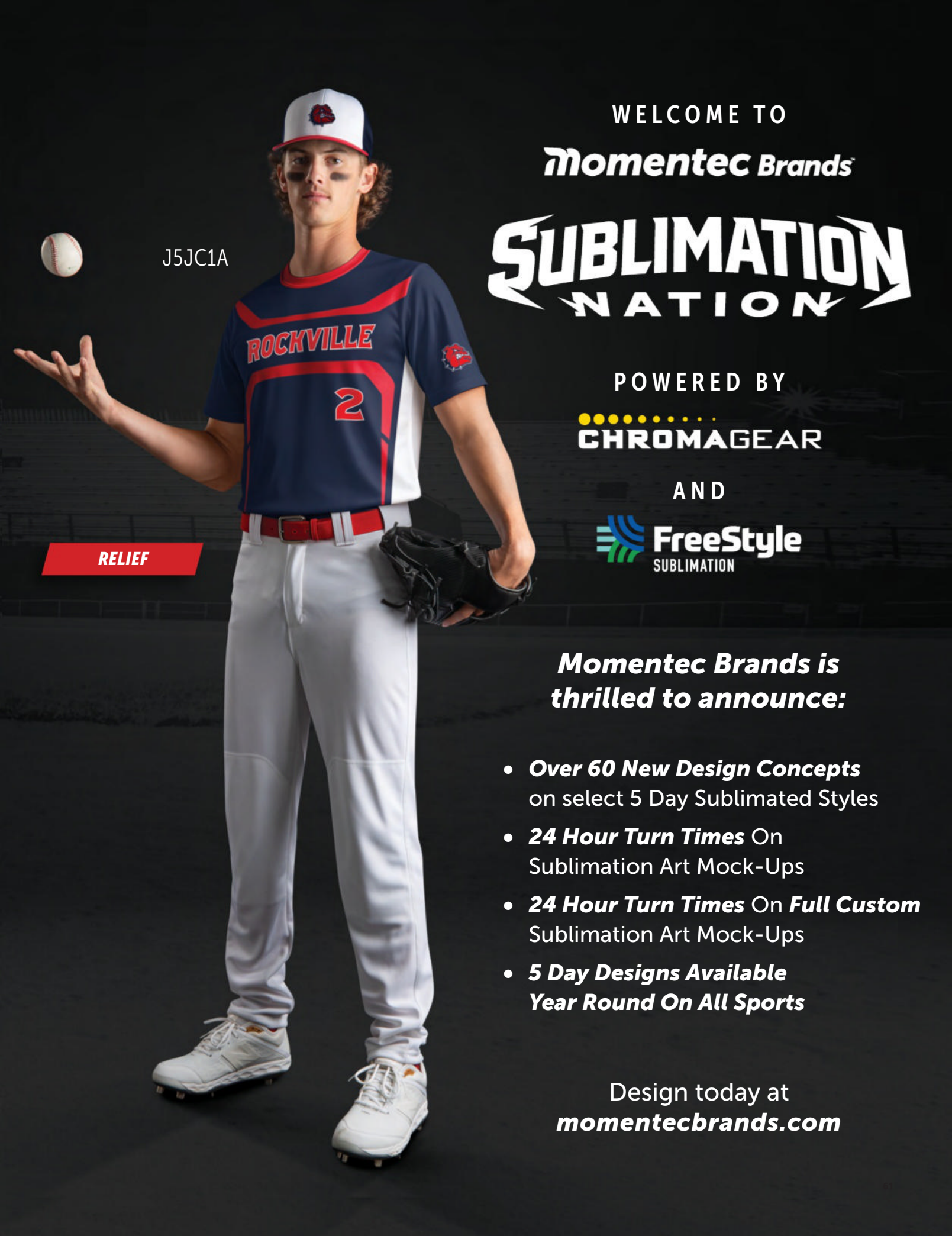

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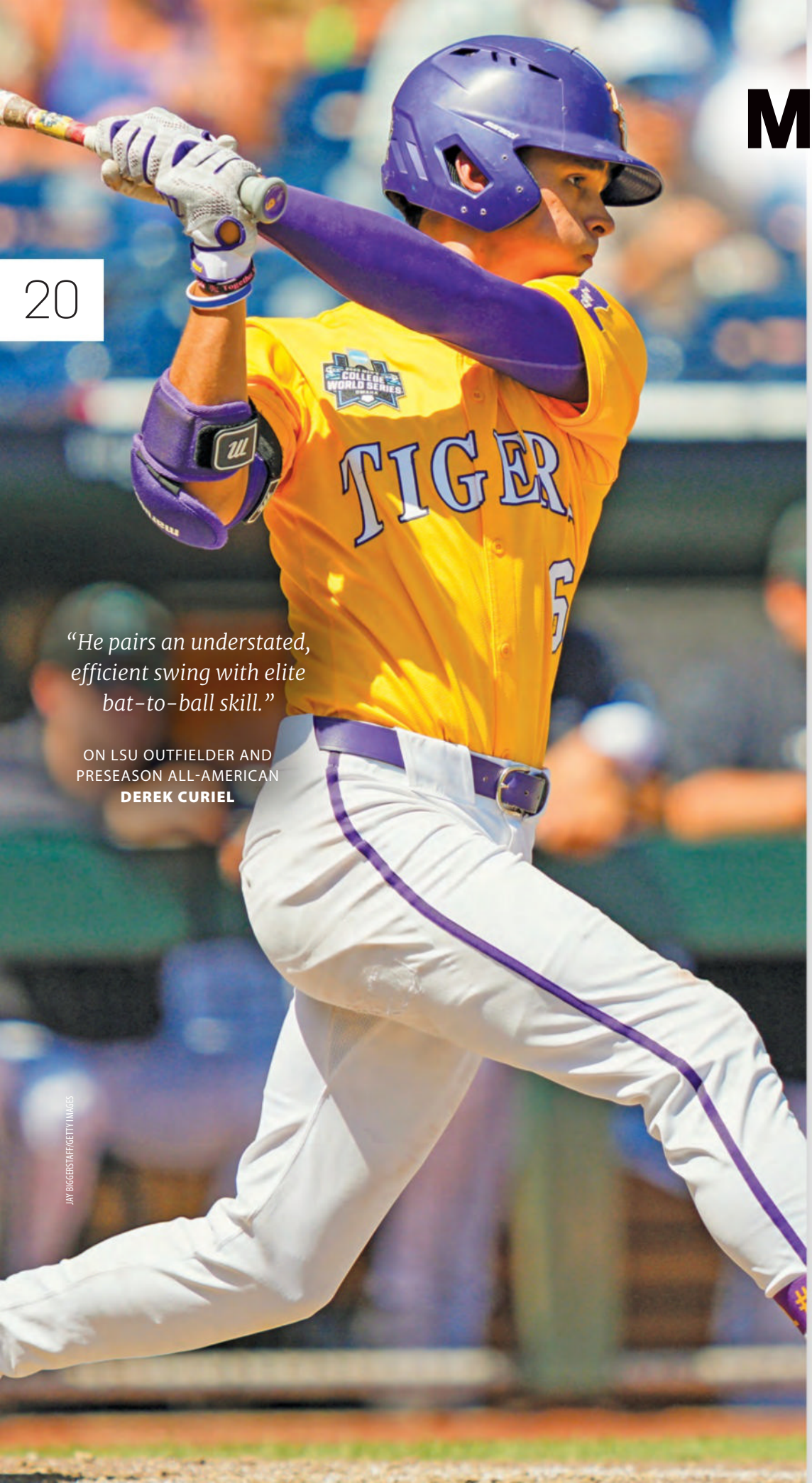

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"He pairs an understated, efficient swing with elite bat-to-ball skill."

ON LSU OUTFIELDER AND PRESEASON ALL-AMERICAN **DEREK CURIEL**

JAY BIGGERSTAFF/GETTY IMAGES

MARCH/ APRIL

MARCH/APRIL 2026, VOLUME 46, ISSUE 4

COLLEGE PREVIEW

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COVER PHOTO BY RIC TAPIA/GETTY IMAGES

NEXT ISSUE: *Our annual MLB Preview and analysis of the Top 100 Prospects.*

Baseball America

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Baseball America conducted chats with our subscribers tied to our Top 10 Prospects rankings for all 30 MLB teams. Here is a sample of some of the questions we answered.

Travis Bazzana's preparation skill is phenomenal. Are you surprised the Guardians second baseman hasn't been more successful during his first two years?

Carlos Collazo: I think I would be more concerned if his batted-ball data or his process had gotten significantly worse, but that's not the case. He still has great hitting traits, and I think he made some nice adjustments in the season. He also had an injury that limited him, so I haven't really changed my thoughts on who he can become as a player.

Is the biggest question mark for the Tigers' Max Anderson where his defensive home will be? Does he have a good enough bat to get called up purely on that tool?

JJ Cooper: That has been the question with Anderson ever since he's been drafted. To his credit, he's improved enough to where second base (and potentially third) is still a possibility, but it would be overly optimistic to say he'll ever be a better option defensively than the Tigers' other options. Good enough bat to get called up? Absolutely, but as the path of Jace Jung has showed, getting up and staying up are two very different things. Jung came up in 2024 and showed he was unplayable at third base, which relegated him to Triple-A for most of the 2025 season.

Did you hear of any disconnect between the minor league and MLB hitting programs? The Red Sox recently swapped in an MiLB/Driveline guy to MLB.

Alex Speier: This has been an ongoing conversation for years, not necessarily about a disconnect, but about what gets trained in the minors. The Red Sox organization emphasizes helping players raise their ceilings—hit the ball harder, farther, at the right angles. There is less of an emphasis on situational hitting—though it would be wrong to say there's none. The addition of John Soteropulos (former Driveline employee, and a coordinator for the last few years) builds on the elevation of Dillon Lawson from a minor league coordinator to big league assistant hitting coach last year. At the big league level, the Red Sox want to add voices who can work with upcoming big leaguers and build on how they trained in the minors, while balancing that with the competitive demands of big league talent and scouting.

Bazzana

How did Dax Kilby's post-draft performance affect his future value estimation? If you had no knowledge of Kilby's debut, where would you place him on this list?

Josh Norris: I'll answer the first part of that question. Obviously he performed well, which is part of the equation, but the fact that I had three separate scouts not affiliated with the Yankees text me to say that really liked what they were seeing really moved the needle for me.

How excited should we be for Athletics shortstop Edgar Montero? If he's able to just hold his advanced metrics in Low-A over the season, is he a Top 100 guy?

Mark Chiarelli: The short answer is that Montero, for me, is one of the most exciting guys in the system, with the caveat that you should approach with a bit of caution given he repeated the DSL and still swings and misses a decent amount. He has some bat-to-ball and defensive home questions to clear up in the ACL before I'm willing to say he's a Top 100 guy by the end of the year, but I also wouldn't rule it out, which I know isn't always the most satisfactory response.

DAVID DUROCHIK/DIAMOND IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES

Scan the QR code to read all 30 Top 10s—and complete chats!

SEASON OF CHANGE

The College Preview heralds the return of baseball. It also ushers in a new print presentation of Baseball America

Year after year, the College Preview serves as our first step into the new season.

The amateur season begins well before MLB spring training games get underway, so each year at this time, we take a look at how the college season is shaping up before we turn our eyes to pro ball.

The College Preview also traditionally serves as the starting point for new looks at Baseball America.

It's true as far back as the first issue. Arkansas outfielder Kevin McReynolds was the cover subject of the first issue of Baseball America, on Feb. 28, 1981. It was called All-America Baseball News at the time, but the foundation of Baseball America's ethos was there in the first issue.

Founder Allan Simpson promised to cover the major leagues, in addition to all the other aspects of baseball that were largely ignored at the time. There would be extensive college coverage as well as in-depth reporting on the minor leagues, the draft, high school and international baseball.

McReynolds was joined by Joe Carter, Mike Moore and Ron Darling on that first-ever preseason college All-America team. On the next page, Miami coach Ron Fraser spoke about the efforts to keep baseball alive at Miami, one of the most successful college programs in the country. In the story, he talked about convincing the Entertainment Sports Production Network—helpfully, the ESPN acronym was also included—to televise a 1980 series against Southern California.

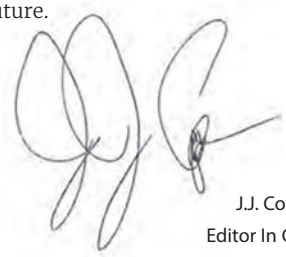
When Baseball America redesigned the magazine in 2019, Florida State's Mike Martin was on the cover. He was preparing for his final season as the Seminoles' coach.

Once again, the College Preview broke ground for a new look for Baseball America. That issue identified Kumar Rocker as the freshman to watch for preseason No. 1 Vanderbilt. It was a wise choice. Rocker threw a no-hitter in super regionals as the Commodores rolled to the title. A few pages later, Adley Rutschman, Nick Lodolo and Michael Busch highlighted the preseason All-America team.

Now, you hold in your hands the next version of Baseball America magazine. We've adapted our size to that of almost every other magazine in the country, which hopefully will make our magazine a bit handier to flip through, read on a tablet or store on a bookshelf. But the coverage remains the reason to pick it up.

We feel pretty confident that UCLA shortstop Roch Cholowsky will be another name to remember from this year's College Preview, much like McReynolds some 45 years ago. And while the upcoming college season is sure to produce plenty of unexpected moments, we believe our preview will give you a leg up on understanding what's likely to happen.

We call this the College Preview, but it's both a preview and a future archive. We know that many of the MLB stars of tomorrow are being covered in the pages of this issue. That's what we love about producing this content for you: We want to give you the first look at the future.



J.J. Cooper
Editor In Chief

Trap Toon *by* PAUL TRAP

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2026 COLLEGE PREVIEW

Baseball is back, and so is the race for glory. UCLA's Roch Cholowsky chases history as his Bruins attempt to break the SEC stranglehold in Omaha. LSU goes for gold for the third time in four seasons, which would extend one of the great runs ever. All the key stories—we've got you covered. Play ball!

BA CRYSTAL **BALL**

College writer Jacob Rudner conferred with the Baseball America draft team to vote on our picks for the preseason Player, Pitcher and Freshman of the Year for 2026.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR

ROCH CHOLOWSKY
SS, UCLA

The expectation is *history* in Westwood as Cholowsky enters the most highly anticipated draft year for a college player since former Oregon State catcher Adley Rutschman in 2019.

In 2025, Cholowsky became just the sixth non-draft-eligible player to win College Player of the Year, joining Robin Ventura, John Olerud, Mike Kelly, Mark Teixeira and Anthony Rendon.

The unanimous top prospect in the 2026 draft class, Cholowsky is the favorite to repeat as College Player of the Year, a feat no player has accomplished in the award's 44-year history.

Runners-Up

- Drew Burress, OF, Georgia Tech
- Sawyer Strosnider, OF, TCU

PITCHER OF THE YEAR

CAMERON FLUKEY
RHP, COASTAL CAROLINA

Flukey announced himself to anyone potentially unfamiliar last June when he helped Coastal Carolina reach the national championship series, throwing 10 innings with 12 strikeouts and a 2.70 ERA at the College World Series.

It capped an outstanding season in which the hard-throwing righty posted a 3.19 ERA and a team-best 118 strikeouts against just 24 walks over 101.2 innings.

Flukey enters his junior season as a candidate to be the first pitcher off the board in the 2026 draft.

Runners-Up

- Dax Whitney, RHP, Oregon State
- Jackson Flora, RHP, UCSB

FRESHMAN OF THE YEAR

JACK BAUER
LHP, MISSISSIPPI STATE

Bauer made history twice last year by becoming the hardest-throwing prep lefthander on record when he touched 102 mph with a searing fastball, then later becoming the hardest-throwing prep pitcher, regardless of handedness, to reach the college level.

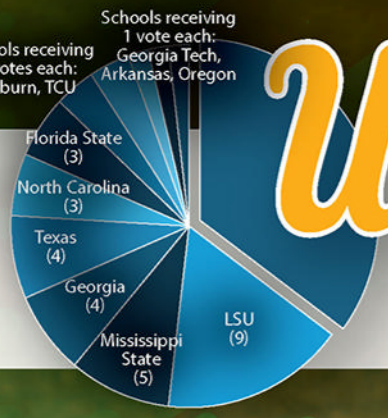
He lived up to that billing during his first collegiate fall and is now expected to take on a contributing workload for a loaded Mississippi State roster.

Runners-Up

- Brock Ketelsen, OF/LHP, Stanford
- Angel Cervantes, RHP, UCLA

Cameron Flukey

Baseball America polled **54** Division I college coaches to predict who will be the 2026 national champion.



UCLA

More than one-third of respondents (19) chose preseason No. 1 UCLA.

FIELD OF 64

Number in parentheses indicates national seed
*^ Regional host * Automatic bid*

LOS ANGELES
- (1) UCLA^*
- (32) UC Santa Barbara*
- Alabama
- Cal Baptist*

OXFORD
- (16) Ole Miss^
- (18) Louisville
- Northeastern*
- Miami (Ohio)*

AUSTIN
- (8) Texas^
- (26) Oregon
- Oklahoma State
- Oral Roberts*

FORT WORTH
- (9) TCU^*
- (22) Florida
- Troy
- Lamar*

BATON ROUGE
- (2) LSU^*
- (31) Wake Forest
- Stetson*
- Yale*

CORVALLIS
- (15) Oregon State^
- (17) Vanderbilt
- Gonzaga*
- Fresno State*

CHAPEL HILL
- (7) North Carolina^
- (28) Texas A&M
- Cincinnati
- High Point*

TALLAHASSEE
- (10) Florida State^
- (23) Southern Miss
- Creighton
- Bryant*

LOS ANGELES
- (1) UCLA
- (16) Ole Miss

AUSTIN
- (8) Texas
- (9) TCU

BATON ROUGE
- (2) LSU
- (15) Oregon State

CHAPEL HILL
- (7) North Carolina
- (10) Florida State

BRACKET 1
- (1) UCLA
- (4) Georgia Tech
- (5) Auburn
- (8) Texas

BRACKET 2
- (2) LSU
- (3) Mississippi State
- (6) Georgia
- (7) North Carolina

FINALS

Best-of-three series at Charles Schwab Field Omaha

June 20–22

AUBURN
- (5) Auburn
- (12) Coastal Carolina

ATLANTA
- (4) Georgia Tech
- (13) Virginia

ATHENS
- (6) Georgia
- (11) Tennessee

STARKVILLE
- (3) Mississippi State
- (14) Arkansas

AUBURN
- (5) Auburn^
- (27) Arizona
- Mercer*
- Little Rock*

CONWAY
- (12) Coastal Carolina^*
- (24) Miami
- Nebraska
- Bethune-Cookman*

ATLANTA
- (4) Georgia Tech^*
- (29) Arizona State
- UTSA
- Saint Louis*

CHARLOTTESVILLE
- (13) Virginia^
- (19) Oklahoma
- Connecticut*
- Wright State*

ATHENS
- (6) Georgia^
- (25) East Carolina*
- NC State
- Central Connecticut*

KNOXVILLE
- (11) Tennessee^
- (21) West Virginia
- Indiana
- Murray State*

STARKVILLE
- (3) Mississippi State^
- (30) Dallas Baptist*
- Kansas
- Holy Cross*

FAYETTEVILLE
- (14) Arkansas^
- (20) Clemson
- UC Irvine
- Fairfield*

JAY BIGGERSTAFF/GETTY IMAGES

HOLDING THE CENTER

Roch Cholowsky embraces everything that comes with being the best player on the best team in the country

by JACOB RUDNER

Brandon Crawford has never watched Roch Cholowsky play in person.

He has never needed to.

A baseball life spent at shortstop allowed Crawford a sixth sense for whether a player belonged at the position. Without ever seeing his footwork, his arm slot or his internal clock, he could tell whether someone had what it took to withstand the rigors of shortstop.

When something real is forming at UCLA, Crawford can recognize it from afar.

He has followed Cholowsky the way most people do now: through box scores and clipped video, through conversations that return to the same name, through the understanding that someone extraordinary was making a name for himself in Westwood.

What Crawford remembers most clearly, though, came years earlier.

Cholowsky was still in high school when they spoke. He was trying to understand what UCLA would ask of him and what it might give back. The conversation was short. Crawford doesn't remember the questions. He remembers the stillness.

Brandon Crawford at UCLA in 2007

"Sometimes you can just tell with guys like him," he said. "He keeps it simple."

In college baseball, simplicity is usually temporary.

The sport is built on movement now. Players migrate. Rosters reset. Stars arrive quickly and leave just as fast. What Cholowsky has done cuts against that current, not loudly or defiantly, but strongly.

As a freshman in 2024, he was good. He fit. He flashed. UCLA, meanwhile, was unraveling. The Bruins won just 19 games, the fewest of coach John Savage's tenure, and the season felt less like a rebuild than a rupture. In an era defined by exits after failure, Cholowsky had every reason to search for one.

He didn't.

He absorbed a losing season without bargaining with it. While the portal offered an exit, Cholowsky chose patience. Not out of loyalty, and not out of stubbornness, but because the version of himself he believed in required time to develop.

That decision changed everything.

By the end of 2025, Cholowsky was no longer part of what UCLA hoped to become. He was the reason it had become it.

He hit .353/.480/.710 with 23 home runs and 74 RBIs in 66 games. He paced the Big Ten in slugging and with a 1.190 OPS.

His defensive value as a shortstop set him apart, too. Cholowsky's 80 runs scored fell just one shy of Chase Utley's UCLA program record. His 179 total bases are second-most by a Bruins player in the 64-team NCAA Tournament era.

COLLEGE & HIGH SCHOOL AWARDS
COLLEGE PLAYER OF THE YEAR
BUILT ON ROCH
Sophomore shortstop Roch Cholowsky's loyalty, leadership and talent resurrect UCLA's program
Last 10 Winners
DRAFT PREVIEW
Baseball America
THE NEXT BIG SWING

Roch Cholowsky's production on both sides of the ball made him our Player of the Year in 2025, when he was a sophomore.

"He's elite," one scout told BA. "He's a competitor, and every aspect of his game has distinct polish. Great feel for the barrel, disciplined hitter who can drive the ball all over the yard, and his actions at shortstop are as smooth as anyone's."

Last June, Cholowsky became the sixth non-draft-eligible player ever named College Player of the Year, captaining UCLA to the College World Series. He was also named conference player of the year—the first Bruin to win that award since Eric Valent in 1998—and later received the Brooks Wallace Award as the nation's top shortstop. He won the ABCA/Rawlings Gold Glove, too.

The season did not hinge on any singular moment. It unfolded through repetition. Through responsibility accepted early and carried daily.

Shortstop has a way of demanding that, Crawford said. The game bends toward you. When something fractures, the middle absorbs it.

"We had one of the best American shortstops over the last 15 years in Brandon Crawford," Savage said.

MIKE JANES/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (CHOLOWSKY); LARRY GOREN/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (CRAWFORD)

"He was a phenomenal shortstop. Roch reminds me of him on the defensive side. They love playing defense. They love being the quarterback. They love handling that 9-on-1 proposition."

Savage did not need a moment to convince Cholowsky that shortstop was where he belonged. There was no inflection point in 2024, no single play or series that forced his hand. He had believed in this version of Cholowsky long before he ever even arrived on campus.

That belief survived a freshman season spent largely out of position. It survived a year when almost everything around him unraveled. Savage did not rush it because he didn't have to. He allowed Cholowsky to grow into the role the same way he had grown into everything else.

The temptation, especially in hindsight, is to frame that patience as restraint. It was closer to confidence.

Shortstop at UCLA is not simply an assignment. It is a legacy. Center field for the Yankees. Quarterback for the Cowboys. Shortstop for the Bruins. The role demands a combination of awareness, accountability and tolerance for blame that does not exist in most players. Savage has always believed players don't rise to that role because they want it. They rise because they can handle it.

And Cholowsky never asked for it. He didn't need to.

When the move finally came, it wasn't framed as a promotion. It was a continuation. Savage has described it as handing over the keys. The program needed order, and Cholowsky was just the man for the job. The effect was immediate, not because Cholowsky changed, but because everything else could now move through him.

Plays found him. Decisions followed. The infield settled. The noise softened. UCLA didn't become something new. It became more itself.

That transformation didn't announce itself loudly. It revealed itself over time, through trust. Cholowsky didn't need to be louder or different. He just needed the ball to keep finding him.

When games tightened, he was there. When the infield needed to be organized,

Core UCLA Bruins players pose at Jackie Robinson Stadium in Los Angeles in January. Front row: Mulivai Levu and Dean West. Back row: Easton Hawk, Roch Cholowsky, Wylan Moss and Roman Martin.

he handled it. When the Bruins needed a steady presence, he provided one. His season didn't just elevate his profile. It clarified the team's identity.

"We always knew he had a chance to be special," Savage said. "It felt like as soon as this guy got the keys (to shortstop), that he was going to take this thing to where everybody wanted it to go."

UCLA enters this season as the national title favorite. Cholowsky enters it as the reigning College Player of the Year.

The road ahead divides cleanly. Becoming the first overall pick in 2026 would place him among many. Winning College Player of the Year again would place him alone.

No one has ever done it twice.

That space, between repetition and singularity, is where this season exists.

College baseball has seldom asked a player to defend an award meant to capture a moment. Every at-bat now answers a season that already exists. Every decision offers a chance to stand on his own.

And yet, nothing about the way Cholowsky plays suggests he is interested in becoming something else. He has always treated the game as a series of obligations rather than opportunities for display. Handle the moment. Let the position dictate the responsibility.

Those ideas don't grow easier with expectation. They grow heavier.

That is the tension now.

UCLA's return has been quieter than most. It came through continuity rather than accumulation, through belief rather than transaction. Cholowsky took no shortcuts. His rise is what happens when talent is allowed to remain in place long enough to harden.

The simplicity Crawford noticed years ago remains intact. It hasn't been replaced by urgency or swallowed by ambition.

Cholowsky doesn't speak like someone chasing history. He understands his situation the way he always has, clearly and without noise.

History, after all, doesn't require intention. It requires presence.

This season is no longer about becoming. That work is finished. It is about holding the center, every day, while everything else accelerates.

That is the burden of being the shortstop. ■

MIKE JANES/FOUR SEAM IMAGES

THE WAITING GAME

By leaning heavily on high school recruits, the Bruins have bucked recent trends

by JACOB RUDNER

"I have my way. And it works for me."

UCLA HEAD COACH JOHN SAVAGE, PICTURED WITH HIS 2013 NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP TEAM

John Savage lives for the feeling. The one when you just know.

He felt it when he began recruiting his current shortstop, Roch Cholowsky, the No. 1 prospect in the 2026 draft. He felt it roughly 15 years earlier with prep righthanders Gerrit Cole and Trevor Bauer. He felt it with Matt McLain, James Kaprielian and Garrett Mitchell, too.

To UCLA's head coach, there is something unmistakable about a program-changing high school recruit. The conviction arrives early and lingers. It widens the lens.

The evaluation unfolds over a longer timeline, but it is also cleaner. Savage can see how a player might mature, how his tools might sharpen, how his presence might carry enough gravity to bend the arc of a program toward another national title.

What Savage did not anticipate was how much the rush would change. Being an elite high school recruiter and developer carries a different weight now than it did just over a decade ago, when UCLA last stood at the top of the sport.

The high school recruiter is a rarer figure today. The transfer portal has rewritten roster construction and compressed timelines across college athletics. Patience is no longer assumed. Projection is no longer celebrated the way it used to be.

But Savage has not abandoned the art that brought him here.

He remains intent on building through the prep ranks.

"I have my way," Savage told Baseball America, "and it works for me."

The Bruins were the clearest outlier in the 2025 College World Series field, and the same is true for the 2026 season.

LSU and Arkansas arrived in Omaha last year with double-digit transfers from four-year schools. Twenty-three of Murray State's 37 players joined the program as non-high school recruits.

The Bruins were the only team in the field with single-digit transfers, with 37 of their 40 rostered players signed out of high school. No other team in Omaha featured a home-grown group higher than 75%. UCLA checked in at 93%, and more than half of its roster had spent at least two years in the program.

The trend defies increasingly common roster construction methods.

"There's just something to be said for getting to know a player and his family before you take them and bring them into your program," Savage said. "We're really invested in that process and making sure that we're bringing in kids with great makeup, not just a set of tools."

To be sure, UCLA isn't the only high level program in the country investing resources into its high school recruiting. It does seem to be putting more stock into that area than other national title hopefuls, though.

In the SEC, the reliance on transfers has reached staggering levels. Georgia led the league with 19 Division I transfers on its roster in 2025, while Kentucky followed with 18. Programs like Alabama, South Carolina and Texas A&M all brought in 13 apiece.

Even traditional prep recruiting powers such as Florida (nine), Vanderbilt (nine) and Tennessee (eight) carried significant transfer totals, proof that the portal has become a core component of roster-building strategy regardless of a program's recruiting pull.

The sport's most prominent powerhouse, LSU, is a prime example of that concept.

When the Tigers captured the national championship in 2023, their roster featured just seven Division I transfers. The headliners—Paul Skenes and Tommy White—were so impactful that they masked the relatively modest volume, but the broader makeup of that roster still leaned on players developed in-house.

PETER LOCKLEY/NCAA PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Two years later, the picture was strikingly different. En route to its 2025 title, LSU carried 14 Division I transfers, accounting for 35% of its roster. Jay Johnson's team was still stocked with blue-chip recruits like outfielder Derek Curiel and righty Casan Evans, but the scale of outside additions illustrated how much the transfer portal has become embedded in roster design, even for the sport's most resource- and history-rich program.

It's trickled down, too. Each of the four mid-major programs that finished the 2025 season ranked in the Top 25 saw a dramatic rise in their transfer totals compared to 2019, the first full season after the portal was instituted.

Coastal Carolina carried seven Division I transfers in 2025 after rostering just one in 2019. Murray State, last year's surprise Omaha qualifier, carried seven compared to three six years ago. UTSA's jump was the sharpest, with 10 Division I transfers in 2025 versus a lone rostered transfer in 2019. Southern Miss, which did not roster a single Division I transfer in 2019, had five in 2025.

It's an understandable trend.

"There's just a lot of value in the portal if you recruit it the right way," Georgia coach Wes Johnson told Baseball America in November. "There's so much data available, and it allows you to put together some great, older teams with physical maturity and experience."

And those things matter. Not even the Bruins can deny it.

UCLA's path to an Omaha appearance in 2025 and preseason No. 1 status in 2026 included just 47 total wins across 2023 and 2024, which marked their worst two-year stretch in over 20 years under Savage. It was an uncomfortable low but hardly one that stemmed from recruiting passivity. UCLA was merely tolerant of the timeline.

"Really the last couple of years, the last thing you want to be is young in college baseball, college football, college basketball," Savage said.

"Ask any Division I football coach or basketball coach—youth is not where you want to be. That model used to work. But that model doesn't work with as many freshmen as we had."

Bouncing back didn't require a strategy overhaul. It demanded time and resulted in maturity.

"We were very intentional about the way we did things," Savage said. "We took the bet that we'd be really good a few years down the line and I think we have a chance to prove that now."

UCLA's success with a light transfer load serves as a beacon of hope for other programs around the country that find themselves needing to cut against the grain.

Recruiting the transfer portal at the highest level is as expensive as it is effective, and the majority of teams simply can't afford to fish in that pond. In an absence of resources, creativity is required.

At Kansas, junior college recruiting has been a staple under coach Dan Fitzgerald, whose teams have been historically successful relative to program standards. Kentucky has recruited some of its top players in recent years from the Division II and III ranks. Murray State won big in 2025 by assembling a roster comprised at least in part of players who started their careers at the high-major level and needed to move down to thrive.

Teams as high school-heavy as the Bruins fit more closely stylistically with the aforementioned programs than transfer-portal juggernauts. They've shown that national competitiveness is still possible.

This year, that belief begins with Cholowsky but extends far beyond him.

"That's absolutely one of the more complete rosters I've seen in a long time," one longtime scout told Baseball America. "I think a lot of attention will go to Cholowsky this year, and it should, but they have so many other talented guys who are going to be very good to outstanding college players. It wouldn't surprise me to see them have multiple All-Americans at the end of the year and huge draft representation."

In an era shaped by immediacy, UCLA has chosen a longer view.

Savage has accepted the discomfort, absorbed the cost and stayed the course. As the Bruins enter 2026 as the sport's standard bearer, they stand as proof that one of college baseball's oldest beliefs still holds.

If you're willing to live with the wait, the feeling can still be real. ■

PRESEASON ALL-AMERICA TEAM

by CARLOS COLLAZO

VAHN LACKEY, C GEORGIA TECH

Lackey is the best defensive catcher in the class, and some scouts think he has a chance to compete for Gold Glove awards one day. He's an excellent athlete and natural receiver and blocker with the actions and arm befitting a high-level defensive catcher. Lackey took a step forward offensively in 2025 and has solid contact skills and zone control. Power is the next area for him to improve.

BRADY BALLINGER, 1B KANSAS

Ballinger played at JC of Southern Nevada before his 2025 transfer to Kansas, where he hit .353/.495/.670 with 16 home runs and 21 doubles. He has a well-rounded offensive profile and was one of just 16 Division I hitters to connect for at least 16 homers and also walk more often than he struck out. Ballinger is likely limited to first base but might be able to play an outfield corner in a pinch.

CHRIS REMBERT, 2B AUBURN

Rembert had one of the most impressive freshman seasons Auburn has seen in years. He was a key force in the lineup with a .344/.467/.55 line, 10 homers and more walks than strikeouts, and his .376 conference average was third-best in the SEC. Rembert then won Team USA's starting second base job over the summer. He's an athletic, bat-first infielder who should be a slam dunk first-rounder.

ACE REESE, 3B MISSISSIPPI STATE

Reese won 2025 SEC newcomer of the year after moving to Mississippi State from Houston and bringing 18 doubles and 21 home runs with him. He's an aggressive and powerful lefthanded hitter with a pro-ready body at 6-foot-4, 220 pounds. Reese has played left field and first base but moved to the hot corner in Starkville. If Reese can improve defensively and stick there, his bat would profile admirably.

ROCH CHOLOWSKY, SS UCLA

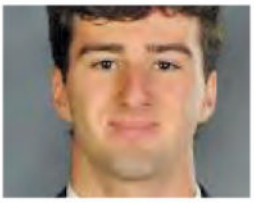
Cholowsky is the best college shortstop scouts have seen in years. He became just the sixth player to win College Player of the Year as a non-eligible prospect and is the consensus favorite to become the first overall pick. Cholowsky is a no-doubt shortstop with smooth and powerful defensive actions to go with a well-rounded offensive package that could fit right at home in the middle of an MLB lineup.

DEREK CURIEL, OF LSU

Curiel's reputation as an advanced pure hitter dates back to his freshman season in high school. As a freshman with LSU last year, he hit .345/.470/.519 with seven home runs and 20 doubles, as well as far better exit velocities than expected given his lean frame. As a draft-eligible sophomore, Curiel will slide from left field to center, where his crisp route-running and solid instincts should allow him to stick.

AJ GRACIA, OF VIRGINIA

Gracia's combination of physicality, impact and contact skills is among the best in the class. He's a 6-foot-3 lefthanded hitter with the power to homer from foul pole to foul pole, and he hit 29 home runs in his first two seasons with Duke, with more walks than strikeouts. Now at Virginia along with coach Chris Pollard, Gracia will look to continue his well-rounded hitting and profiles as a prototype big league right fielder.



CAMERON FLUKEY, SP COASTAL CAROLINA

Flukey is a 6-foot-6, 210-pound righthander who helped pitch Coastal Carolina to a College World Series runner-up finish in 2025. He posted a 3.28 ERA over 17 starts with a 28.3% strikeout rate and 5.8% walk rate. Flukey's arsenal is led by a mid-90s fastball that he has tremendous feel to spot in the zone, and he'll also mix in a curveball, slider and a changeup versus lefties. He could be the first pitcher drafted.

JACKSON FLORA, SP UC SANTA BARBARA

UC Santa Barbara is a pitching factory, and Flora could follow 2025 righthander Tyler Bremner as a first-rounder in 2026. Flora is a 6-foot-5 righty with whippy arm speed and one of the loudest fastball/slider combos in the class. His fastball sits in the mid 90s and has touched 100 mph with explosive life out of the hand, while his sweeper slider is a swing-and-miss pitch that could be plus. In 2025, he struck out 86 hitters in 75 innings.

GABE GAECKLE, SP ARKANSAS

Gaeckle is an undersized righthander with a 6-foot frame and drop-and-drive mechanics who delivers the ball with tremendous arm speed. He pitched as a reliever as a freshman at Arkansas, then moved into a starting role in 2025. Overall he owns a 3.64 ERA in 114 innings and sits in the mid 90s with a fastball that has solid riding life. Both his slider and curveball have plus potential and have shown swing-and-miss traits.

GUNNAR WORD/TEXAS RANGERS/GETTY IMAGES (REMBERT)

Chris Rembert 2B • Auburn

DREW BURRESS, OF GEORGIA TECH

Burress is one of the most productive college hitters in the country. His 1.333 OPS as a freshman was the ninth-best mark in the country. His 25 home runs broke the Georgia Tech freshman record, and in 2025 he added 19 more. Burress is a career .357/.490/.756 hitter in two seasons in Atlanta. While he stands just 5-foot-9, he plays a good center field and has real tools to back the numbers.

LIAM PETERSON, SP FLORIDA

Peterson boasted big arm talent coming out of high school, when he ranked as a top 100 member of the 2023 class. Now, he is in position to be one of the first arms off the board in 2026. At 6-foot-5, 220 pounds, Peterson looks the part and leads his arsenal with an upper-90s fastball and plus slider. He also made promising strides with his control and command, improving his walk rate from 13.5% to 10.5% while striking out 96 hitters.

CARSON WIGGINS, RP ARKANSAS

Wiggins was touching 99 mph as a high schooler, and he was off to a great start as a reliever for Arkansas in 2025. An elbow injury that required surgery ended his campaign after just 14 innings, but in that time he posted a 3.21 ERA with a 33.9% strikeout rate. Wiggins has premium arm talent, but is expected to miss much of the 2026 season and is a wild card because of that. If he pitches, he'll have another chance to prove himself.

NOAH FRANCO, TWP TCU

Franco was a two-way player on multiple USA Baseball 18U National Teams in high school, then pitched and hit for TCU as a freshman in 2025. He posted a 7.30 ERA as a starter and reliever in 12.1 innings. He projects best as a hitter in pro ball. He's a 6-foot-3, 230-pound lefthanded hitter with bat speed and power who slashed .313/.396/.548 with 11 home runs and 16 doubles as a freshman. Now, he'll have a chance to up his profile as a sophomore.

How We Select Preseason All-America Teams

Our preseason All-America teams are voted on by MLB scouting departments. This year, we received votes from 18 different teams.

Consensus top prospect Roch Cholowsky leads the first team as a unanimous selection and is joined by two other unanimous first-teamers: Cameron Flukey and Drew Burress.

Because our preseason All-America teams are scout-driven, they are typically a strong predictor of first-round draft potential. The 2025 class was more of an anomaly—just three of the 14 first-teamers from the 2025 team went on to become first-round picks. In 2024 that number was nine of 14.

SECOND TEAM

C	Ryder Helfrick	Arkansas
1B	Myles Bailey	Florida State
2B	Jarren Advincula	Georgia Tech
3B	Gavin Grahovac	Texas A&M
SS	Justin Lebron	Alabama
OF	Zion Rose	Louisville
OF	Caden Sorrell	Texas A&M
OF	Sawyer Strosnider	TCU
SP	Tegan Kuhns	Tennessee
SP	Ethan Norby	ECU
SP	Joey Volchko	Georgia
SP	Dax Whitney	Oregon State
RP	Luke McNeillie	Florida
TW	Blaine Brown	Tennessee

THIRD TEAM

C	Carson Tinney	Texas
1B	Mulivai Levu	UCLA
2B	Cam Kozeal	Arkansas
3B	Daniel Cuvet	Miami
SS	Chris Hacopian	Texas A&M
OF	Caden Bogenpohl	Missouri State
OF	Chase Brunson	TCU
OF	Lucas Moore	Louisville
SP	Cole Carlon	Arizona State
SP	Ethan Kleinschmit	Oregon State
SP	Aidan Knaak	Clemson
SP	Shane Sdao	Texas A&M
RP	Thomas Burns	Texas
TW	Evan Dempsey	Florida Gulf Coast

Roch Cholowsky

COLLEGE PREVIEW

PRESEASON TOP 25

capsules by JACOB RUDNER

1 UCLA

Last Season: *48-18 (22-8 Big Ten); reached College World Series*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 6*
Coach (record at school): *John Savage (724-481-2, 22nd season)*

STRENGTHS

Continuity is the defining strength of this roster, and it begins with reigning College Player of the Year and shortstop **Roch Cholowsky**, who anchors both the lineup and the infield. He is the centerpiece of a veteran offense that returns production at nearly every spot. First baseman **Mulivai Levu** was a third-team All-American last season, while righties **Wylan Moss** and **Michael Barnett** and infielder **Roman Martin** earned all-conference honors. That core, combined with other productive and proven returners, gives UCLA experience across the diamond, from the middle infield to the rotation, and reduces the need for early-season experimentation. The Bruins supplemented via the transfer portal selectively rather than aggressively and secured righthander **Logan Reddemann** and outfielder **Will Gasparino**. UCLA also beat the draft for freshman righty **Angel Cervantes** and infielder **Dominic Cadiz**. The result is a roster with depth, role clarity and few obvious gaps.

WEAKNESSES

There is no clear personnel deficiency on this roster. Most contributors from a College World Series team return, and areas that required reinforcement were addressed without disrupting the roster's balance. The coaching staff remains intact, and the team has already experienced what it takes to win a conference title and advance deep into the postseason. The remaining challenge is situational rather than structural. For the Bruins, turning experience into a championship requires navigating the unique pressures and variability of being the top-ranked preseason team as well as the spotlight that comes with having the clear-cut top draft prospect in the fold.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Roch Cholowsky is the centerpiece of UCLA's roster and one of the most complete hitters in the nation. In 2025, he hit .353/.480/.710 with 23 home runs and had more walks (45) than strikeouts (30), earning College Player of the Year honors. His batted-ball profile was equally convincing, as he produced a 91.5 mph average exit velocity with a 106.5 mph 90th percentile mark, paired with a 54% hard-hit rate and 31.3% barrel rate. Cholowsky combined that impact with an 89% zone-contact rate and an 81.7% overall contact rate while lifting the ball with intent, evidenced by a 44.3% air-pull rate. He was the only hitter in the country to reach all of those thresholds, creating a blend of bat speed, contact frequency and impact that can propel players to stardom.

2026 LINEUP

**Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Cashel Dugger	Jr.	.279	.421	.360	172	3	25
1B	Mulivai Levu	Jr.	.320	.389	.522	272	12	85
2B	Phoenix Call	Jr.	.256	.349	.342	199	3	31
3B	Roman Martin	Jr.	.316	.450	.502	237	9	61
SS	Roch Cholowsky	Jr.	.353	.480	.710	252	23	74
OF	Dean West	Jr.	.320	.470	.425	247	4	41
OF	Will Gasparino*	Jr.	.242	.339	.512	211	13	49
OF	Jarrod Hocking	Sr.	.206	.282	.321	131	4	22
DH	Michael Cunningham	G-Sr.	Transfer—San Francisco State					

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Logan Reddemann*	Jr.	9	55.0	2.29	1.02	23.2	5.3
SP	Wylan Moss	So.	9	48.1	2.98	1.28	24.3	7.9
SP	Michael Barnett	Sr.	14	86.0	3.98	1.40	20.1	5.9
RP	Easton Hawk	So.	0	24.0	4.50	1.33	29.0	6.5
RP	Angel Cervantes	Fr.	HS—Downey, Calif.					

RIC TAPIA/GETTY IMAGES

2 LSU

Derek Curiel

Last Season: *53-15 (19-11 SEC); won College World Series*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 1*
Coach (record at school): *Jay Johnson (190-77, 5th season)*

STRENGTHS

LSU enters the season operating from familiar ground under **Jay Johnson**, whose program has converted elite talent and institutional advantage into sustained success. A second national championship in three years reaffirmed that foundation in 2025 and extended a run that has created gaudy expectations in Baton Rouge. While roster turnover is a constant at LSU, the Tigers once again bring back key contributors while supplementing aggressively through the transfer portal. Outfielder **Derek Curiel**, righthander **Casan Evans** and shortstop **Steven Milam** return as central pieces. Catcher **Cade Arrambide** tracked closely with Curiel throughout the fall, giving LSU a strong offensive presence at a premium position. LSU also added impact talent from outside the program, including former Kansas righty **Cooper Moore** and former Grand Canyon first baseman **Zach Yorke**. Moore adds another experienced arm, while the remainder of the pitching staff offers significant raw ability. Though roles beyond Evans and Moore are still taking shape, the overall talent profile mirrors that of LSU's recent championship-caliber staffs.

WEAKNESSES

Roster turnover remains the natural counterweight to LSU's talent pipeline. Nine players from the 2025 championship team were drafted, along with several high school signees who never reached campus. Among those departures were Pitcher of the Year **Kade Anderson**, Saturday starter **Anthony Eyanson**, outfielder **Ethan Frey** and first baseman **Jared Jones**. Those exits create openings across both the lineup and rotation, placing immediate responsibility on newcomers and younger returners. Several players will be asked to fill high-leverage roles with little or no SEC experience.

PLAYER TO KNOW

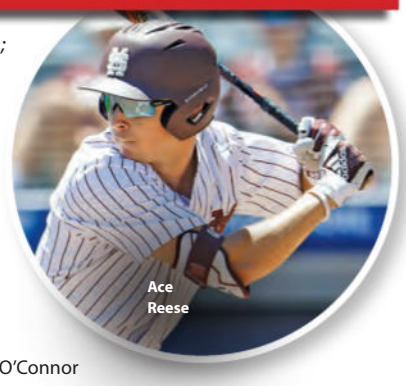
Derek Curiel was one of the nation's most productive freshmen in 2025, hitting .345/.470/.519 with 29 extra-base hits while posting nearly as many walks as strikeouts. The lefthanded-hitting outfielder pairs an understated, efficient swing with elite bat-to-ball skill, reflected in a 94% in-zone contact rate and a remarkable 97% mark against fastballs. Curiel shifts to center field for his draft-eligible sophomore season and profiles as a steady middle-of-the-order presence built on contact quality, strike-zone control and consistency.

2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Cade Arrambide	So.	.242	.351	.484	62	4	14
1B	Zach Yorke*	Sr.	.339	.447	.632	174	13	46
2B	Tanner Reaves	Sr.	.262	.372	.446	65	3	12
3B	Trent Caraway*	Jr.	.267	.350	.470	251	12	47
SS	Steven Milam	Jr.	.295	.398	.506	241	11	57
OF	Derek Curiel	So.	.345	.470	.519	258	7	55
OF	Jake Brown	Jr.	.272	.390	.560	178	8	48
OF	Chris Stanfield	Sr.	.298	.414	.404	208	1	31
DH	Seth Dardar*	G-Sr.	.326	.429	.636	184	13	45

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Casan Evans	So.	3	52.2	2.05	1.20	31.7	8.5
SP	Cooper Moore*	Jr.	14	88.2	3.96	1.24	22.8	5.1
SP	William Schmidt	So.	6	32.1	4.73	1.55	27.0	14.5
RP	Zac Cowan	Sr.	2	52.0	2.94	1.08	28.0	5.6
RP	Mavrick Rizy	So.	0	24.2	4.74	1.66	24.6	16.1

3 MISSISSIPPI STATE


Ace Reese

Last Season: *36-23 (15-15 SEC); lost at Tallahassee Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *NR*
Coach (record at school): *Brian O'Connor (1st season)*

STRENGTHS

After the dismissal of coach **Chris Lemonis**, the Bulldogs landed longtime Virginia coach **Brian O'Connor**, who departed Charlottesville after 22 seasons. O'Connor moved quickly to reshape the roster, securing one of the nation's strongest transfer classes, signing a wave of high-profile prep talent and retaining key contributors. O'Connor's first roster in Starkville reflects a comprehensive, layered approach. Retention formed the foundation. Star third baseman **Ace Reese** stayed in the fold despite portal speculation. The Bulldogs also retained third-team All-America two-way player **Noah Sullivan**, infielder **Gehrig Frei** and young righthanders **Duke Stone** and **Ryan McPherson**. From there, O'Connor leaned heavily into the transfer portal. He brought several pieces from Virginia, including outfielders **James Nunnallee** and **Aidan Teel** and lefthander **Tomas Valincius**, while also landing non-Virginia transfers such as first baseman **Blake Bevis**, outfielder **Vytas Valincius** and pitchers **Tyler Pitzer**, **Jackson Logar** and **Maddox Webb**. The final layer came through high school recruiting, which netted five top-300 prospects, including hard-throwing lefthander **Jack Bauer**, who could impact the staff early.

WEAKNESSES

The challenge facing Mississippi State is not talent-driven, but expectation-driven. The decision to part ways with Lemonis, fewer than four full seasons removed from delivering the program's only national championship, clarified the standard: Anything short of national contention is insufficient. That reality creates pressure even for a coach with O'Connor's résumé. His final season at Virginia ended without an NCAA Tournament berth after a run of three College World Series appearances in four years despite being ranked fifth nationally to start the season. A similar early stumble in Starkville would draw significant scrutiny.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Ace Reese emerged as one of the nation's premier hitters in 2025, slashing .352/.422/.718 with 18 doubles, 21 home runs and 66 RBIs while earning second-team All-America honors. He followed that season with a productive Cape Cod League stint and time with USA Baseball's Collegiate National Team. Reese pairs compact mechanics with explosive bat speed, producing a 105.4 mph 90th percentile exit velocity and a 55% hard-hit rate.

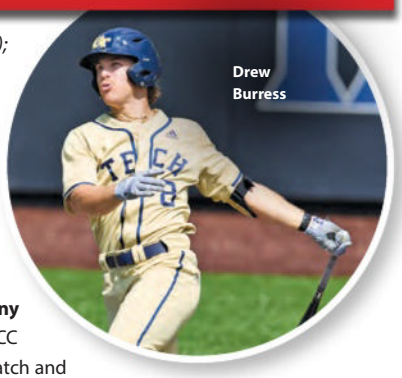
2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Andrew Raymond*	So.	.287	.393	.431	174	5	33
1B	Blake Bevis*	Sr.	.301	.369	.615	226	18	52
2B	Gehrig Frei	Sr.	.345	.404	.586	145	8	17
3B	Ace Reese	Jr.	.352	.422	.718	227	21	66
SS	Drew Wyers*	Sr.	.407	.521	.710	145	11	50
OF	Aidan Teel*	R-Jr.	.317	.442	.538	186	7	40
OF	James Nunnallee*	So.	.296	.407	.401	142	1	26
OF	Vytas Valincius*	G-Sr.	.348	.434	.520	204	7	58
DH	Noah Sullivan	G-Sr.	.345	.475	.645	203	15	46

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Tomas Valincius*	So.	12	64.2	4.59	1.25	25.5	6.2
SP	Duke Stone	So.	0	4.2	5.79	1.93	29.2	12.5
SP	Jackson Logar*	Jr.	14	74.0	3.53	1.23	21.4	12.2
RP	Ryan McPherson	So.	2	39.1	4.12	1.09	32.9	8.8
RP	Jack Bauer	Fr.		HS—Frankfort, Ill.				

JAY BIGGERSTAFF/GETTY IMAGES (CURIEL), EDDIE KELLY (REESE), BRIAN WESTERHOLT/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (BURRESS), DAVID BUONO/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES (REMBERT)

4 GEORGIA TECH


Drew Burress

Last Season: *41-19 (19-11 ACC); lost at Oxford Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 25*
Coach (record at school): *James Ramsey (0-0, 1st season)*

STRENGTHS

Georgia Tech delivered a fitting sendoff for longtime coach **Danny Hall** in 2025, winning its sixth ACC regular-season title under his watch and earning Hall his fifth ACC coach of the year honor. Hall handed the program to top assistant **James Ramsey**, who inherits a roster built to contend immediately. The Yellow Jackets enter the season with one of the most imposing lineups in college baseball, led by center fielder **Drew Burress**, whose production over the past two seasons places him among the most reliable hitters in the country. The depth behind him is equally compelling. Georgia Tech returns catcher **Vahn Lackey**, first baseman **Kent Schmidt**, second baseman **Alex Hernandez** and outfielder **Caleb Daniel**, among others, forming a veteran core that consistently applies pressure throughout the order. The lineup minimizes soft spots and allows Georgia Tech to sustain offensive balance. On the mound, the Yellow Jackets added Rutgers righthander **Justin Shadek** and Tennessee lefthander **Dylan Loy**. They also bring back high-usage reliever **Mason Patel** and starter **Tate McKee**, giving the staff experience and defined roles.

WEAKNESSES

Ramsey steps into his first head coaching role after serving as a central figure in Hall's roster construction and player development. The transition from trusted lieutenant to program leader can be seamless, but it carries inherent risk in the modern college environment, particularly within the ACC. Recent precedent has shown that even highly regarded assistants inheriting talented rosters can struggle early. Managing expectations, overseeing a veteran roster and navigating the week-to-week demands of a power conference will test Ramsey immediately. How quickly that adjustment settles may determine whether Georgia Tech converts its talent advantage into postseason traction.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Drew Burress has established himself as one of the most productive hitters despite an undersized frame. Over two seasons, he has slashed .357/.490/.756 with 44 home runs, 38 doubles and 111 walks against 79 strikeouts. His combination of plate discipline, impact and consistency makes him the engine of Georgia Tech's offense. He's expected to contend strongly for Player of the Year and is viewed widely as a potential early first-rounder.

2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Vahn Lackey	Jr.	.347	.421	.500	222	6	42
1B	Kent Schmidt	Jr.	.397	.464	.596	156	5	43
2B	Alex Hernandez	So.	.335	.415	.609	230	16	69
3B	Ryan Zuckerman*	Jr.	.295	.382	.555	220	13	48
SS	Jarren Advincula*	Jr.	.342	.410	.506	237	6	33
OF	Drew Burress	Jr.	.333	.469	.693	228	19	62
OF	Caleb Daniel	So.	.316	.399	.515	206	7	32
OF	Will Baker	So.	.263	.336	.495	99	6	26
DH	Carson Kerce	So.	.313	.411	.475	198	4	40

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Justin Shadek*	R-So.	15	59.0	7.78	1.78	17.8	12.7
SP	Tate McKee	Jr.	16	80.0	4.84	1.50	22.9	10.5
SP	Dylan Loy*	Jr.	1	34.0	3.97	0.97	26.1	8.0
RP	Mason Patel	G-Sr.	0	70.0	3.34	1.07	22.6	6.4
RP	Caden Spivey	Sr.	5	33.1	4.05	1.62	20.5	14.1

5 AUBURN

Chris Rembert

Last Season: *41-20 (17-13 SEC); lost at Auburn Super Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 10*
Coach (record at school): *Butch Thompson (324-232-1, 11th season)*

STRENGTHS

After finishing 27-25 overall and 8-21 in SEC play, its second conference finish below .500 in four seasons, Auburn swiftly rebounded. In 2025, the Tigers returned to a super regional and reestablished momentum, showing how quickly elite high school recruiting and targeted transfer portal additions can reshape a roster. A sophomore core led by catcher **Chase Fralick**, second baseman **Chris Rembert** and outfielder **Bub Terrell** emerged as a foundation, while infielder **Eric Guevara**, outfielder **Cade Belyeu** and slugger **Lucas Steele** rounded out an increasingly dangerous lineup. Head coach **Butch Thompson** supplemented that group through the portal ahead of the 2026 season, highlighted by the addition of projected starting first baseman **Eddie Madrigal**, who hit 21 home runs at Saint Mary's last year. Much of the projected lineup has already produced in the SEC, beginning with Rembert, who earned Freshman All-America honors after establishing himself as one of the SEC's most advanced young hitters. All together, the Tigers boast a veteran lineup with multiple paths to production, built on depth and familiarity with the league.

WEAKNESSES

The primary questions facing the Tigers surround their pitching staff following significant turnover. Auburn lost **Dylan Watts**, **Cam Tilly**, **Samuel Dutton**, **Hayden Murphy** and **Cade Fisher** to the professional ranks. The Tigers turned to the portal for reinforcements, including former Western Kentucky righthander **Drew Whalen**, who posted a 3.53 ERA with 90 strikeouts against 31 walks in 81.2 innings last season. While Whalen has enjoyed collegiate success, translating that performance to the SEC remains an open question. **Christian Chatterton** and **Jake Marciano** return after showing promise as starters, with Chatterton the more consistent of the two.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Chris Rembert enters the season regarded by evaluators as one of the top pure hitters in the 2026 draft class. He anchored Auburn's lineup in 2025, batting .344 with 14 doubles and 10 home runs while finishing with nearly as many walks as strikeouts. Rembert's approach is compact and efficient, pairing limited pre-swing movement with plus bat speed that allows the barrel to stay in the zone and do damage consistently.

2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Chase Fralick	So.	.335	.426	.472	212	4	41
1B	Eddie Madrigal*	R-Jr.	.368	.462	.698	242	21	78
2B	Chris Rembert	So.	.344	.467	.555	209	10	46
3B	Eric Guevara	Jr.	.331	.388	.556	124	5	29
SS	Ryne Farber*	Jr.	.267	.382	.380	221	4	33
OF	Bub Terrell	So.	.300	.372	.458	203	5	41
OF	Cade Belyeu	Jr.	.278	.450	.444	126	5	20
OF	Bristol Carter	Jr.	.243	.331	.336	140	2	13
DH	Lucas Steele	Sr.	.270	.411	.491	159	9	45

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Drew Whalen*	Jr.	16	81.2	3.53	1.25	25.7	8.9
SP	Christian Chatterton	So.	14	52.1	4.47	1.05	28.0	8.4
SP	Jake Marciano*	So.	14	60.2	6.08	1.45	25.5	6.5
RP	Ethan Harden*	R-Jr.	0	29.1	2.45	1.09	25.8	8.1
RP	Ryan Hetzler	Jr.	0	35.0	3.86	1.20	16.7	2.7

6 GEORGIA

Last Season: *43-17 (18-12 SEC); lost at Athens Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 20*
Coach (record at school): *Wes Johnson (86-34, 3rd season)*

Joey Volchko

STRENGTHS

Georgia spent nearly a decade searching for traction under **Scott Stricklin**, reaching the postseason just three times in nine full seasons and never advancing to a super regional. That context only reinforces the speed in which **Wes Johnson** redefined the program's ceiling. The Bulldogs' defining advantage in 2026 is experience layered on top of ability. Catcher **Daniel Jackson** and infielders **Kolby Branch**, **Tre Phelps** and **Ryan Black** all return after productive 2025 seasons. Former Seattle two-way player **Kenny Ishikawa** arrives after drawing strong internal reviews, while former Stanford righthanders **Joey Volchko** and **Matt Scott** bring premium arm talent that has yet to translate consistently in college. Georgia also added slugger **Jack Arcamone**, outfielders **Scott Newman** and **Jordy Oriach** and righthander **Caden Aoki**. Collectively, the Bulldogs are built on Division I experience and established production rather than projection.

WEAKNESSES

The cost of a transfer-heavy build is uncertainty. Fall evaluations offer limited predictive value, particularly when many contributors are adjusting to SEC competition after coming from mid-major schools. While Ishikawa's fall performance was encouraging, it came against similarly untested peers rather than established SEC arms and bats. There is also an unresolved postseason question. Georgia has won at a level that suggests deeper potential under Johnson, yet the program has not broken through to the College World Series since 2008. Translating regular season success into reaching the final eight-team field is difficult for any roster. Doing so while integrating a large group of new contributors in the SEC is even tougher.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Joey Volchko is Georgia's highest-variance piece. The righthander possesses premium raw stuff but has struggled to consistently locate it, which contributed to a 5.89 ERA and 109 strikeouts to 72 walks in 113 inning over two years at Stanford. Georgia helped Volchko make significant changes over the fall, including adding a true changeup and sweeper, while his arm slot dropped naturally by three to four inches. If those adjustments allow him to live in the strike zone, he has the ceiling to change the staff's shape and his own draft trajectory.

2026 LINEUP

**Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Daniel Jackson	Jr.	.240	.365	.612	121	14	36
1B	Tre Phelps	Jr.	.318	.409	.547	201	10	44
2B	Ryan Black	Sr.	.276	.390	.500	116	7	18
3B	Michael O'Shaughnessy*	Sr.	.369	.482	.691	217	17	70
SS	Kolby Branch	Sr.	.303	.398	.537	218	13	41
OF	Kenny Ishikawa*	So.	.318	.420	.562	201	8	32
OF	Scott Newman*	R-Jr.	.300	.410	.582	237	19	60
OF	Jordy Oriach*	Sr.	.388	.470	.748	214	16	63
DH	Jack Arcamone*	Jr.	.355	.463	.675	197	13	62

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Caden Aoki*	G-Sr.	16	97.0	3.99	1.10	22.2	3.5
SP	Joey Volchko*	Jr.	15	70.1	6.01	1.61	17.3	10.5
SP	Kenny Ishikawa*	So.	9	66.1	4.21	1.57	24.1	7.3
RP	Matt Scott*	Sr.	11	52.1	6.02	1.70	23.0	9.0
RP	Dylan Vigue*	Jr.	8	59.1	4.25	1.50	19.0	15.6

7 NORTH CAROLINA

Last Season: *46-15 (18-11 ACC); lost at Chapel Hill Super Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 9*
Coach (record at school): *Scott Forbes (200-104, 6th season)*

Jason DeCaro

STRENGTHS

North Carolina's standard was set under **Mike Fox** and has been sustained under **Scott Forbes**, who has guided the program to super regionals in three of his first five seasons—including 2025—and a College World Series appearance in 2024. Forbes inherited a program built for postseason play and has preserved that identity while modernizing the roster through the portal. Recent teams have absorbed the loss of major contributors without losing traction, a track record that informs expectations following the departures of ace **Jake Knapp**, outfielder **Kane Kepley** and others. The 2026 roster reflects that same balance, blending returning, draft-caliber pieces with a wave of transfer portal additions positioned to contribute immediately. North Carolina enters the season with viable options across nearly every position group, allowing Forbes to manage workloads, play matchups and withstand attrition. Juniors **Jason DeCaro** and **Folger Boaz** and sophomore **Ryan Lynch** are the most likely candidates to open the season in weekend roles, but sophomore **Walker McDuffie** remains a high-leverage option after earning second-team Freshman All-America honors as a reliever in 2025. That same redundancy extends to the position side. In the outfield, George Mason transfer **Owen Hull** joins returning sophomore **Sawyer Black** and senior **Carter French**, while freshman **Tyler Howe** presses for early playing time.

WEAKNESSES

While North Carolina has leaned heavily on high-octane lineups in recent seasons, much of the projected offense now comes from outside the power-conference ecosystem. Catcher **Macon Winslow** is the lone projected starter with ACC experience, while **Cooper Nicholson**, **Jake Schaffner**, **Erik Paulsen**, Hull and **Michael Maginnis** arrive from mid- and low-major programs. That influx introduces variability. Proven production elsewhere does not guarantee immediate ACC success, and early offensive consistency will hinge on how quickly those bats adjust to velocity, depth and scouting.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Ryan Lynch emerged as one of the nation's most effective freshman relievers in 2025, posting a 2.93 ERA with a 27.2% strikeout rate over 61.1 innings and earning Freshman All-America honors. He now projects as a rotation piece, carrying swing-and-miss ability and workload experience into a larger role.

2026 LINEUP

**Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Macon Winslow*	Jr.	.278	.391	.490	198	9	48
1B	Erik Paulsen*	Jr.	.358	.452	.585	193	9	44
2B	Gavin Gallaher	Jr.	.325	.409	.603	237	17	68
3B	Cooper Nicholson	Jr.	Transfer—Iowa Central JC					
SS	Jake Schaffner*	Jr.	.367	.435	.467	229	2	21
OF	Sawyer Black	So.	.297	.409	.568	37	3	6
OF	Owen Hull*	Jr.	.367	.474	.557	237	8	63
OF	Carter French	Sr.	.280	.357	.280	100	0	12
DH	Michael Maginnis*	G-Sr.	.302	.385	.516	225	10	52

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Jason DeCaro	Jr.	16	83.1	3.78	1.26	19.7	7.3
SP	Ryan Lynch	So.	3	61.1	2.93	1.13	27.2	9.4
SP	Folger Boaz	Jr.	4	30.0	3.90	1.60	21.3	12.8
RP	Walker McDuffie	So.	1	55.1	3.74	1.08	31.9	11.1
RP	Matthew Matthijs	Sr.	0	18.2	4.34	1.50	34.9	9.3

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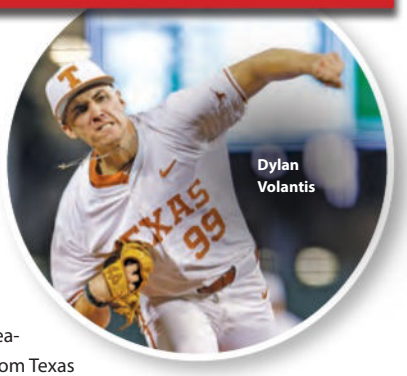
8 TEXAS


Dylan Volantis

Last Season: *44-14 (22-8 SEC); lost at Austin Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 18*
Coach (record at school): *Jim Schlossnagle (44-14, 2nd season)*

STRENGTHS

Texas altered the balance of the sport with the most jarring coaching move of the 2024 offseason, prying **Jim Schlossnagle** from Texas A&M and immediately validating the hire with an SEC regular season title. The transition was seamless on the surface. The roster recalibrated quickly under one of the game's most accomplished active coaches, yet the season ended with a jolt. Despite hosting, the Longhorns were eliminated in the regional round by UTSA. That tension now frames 2026. Texas' foundation is its pitching staff, which gained rare continuity when juniors **Luke Harrison**, **Ruger Riojas** and **Max Grubbs** opted to return despite draft interest. The group grew deeper with the return of sophomore lefty **Dylan Volantis**, the 2025 Freshman of the Year, who transitions from the closer role into the rotation alongside Harrison and Riojas. Junior righthander **Thomas Burns** returns to a bullpen that also includes sophomore **Jason Flores**, who made a notable leap under pitching coach **Max Weiner** this offseason. On the position side, Texas returns a strong middle-infield foundation in **Adrian Rodriguez** and **Ethan Mendoza**. The Longhorns also added offensive upside through the portal, highlighted by catcher **Carson Tinney**, whose exit-velocity data stood out throughout the offseason, and Seton Hall outfielder **Aiden Robbins**, who hit .422 and brings a tool set that has drawn draft attention.

WEAKNESSES

The most immediate question is positional. Rodriguez shifts to shortstop after splitting time across second base, third base and left field as a freshman, placing him at one of the most demanding defensive spots. There is also the broader postseason question. Texas' pitching depth and experience should support sustained regular season success, but the group must translate that advantage into NCAA Tournament resilience. Offensively, portal additions will need to convert raw tools and past production into consistent impact.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Dylan Volantis authored a historic freshman season, posting a 1.94 ERA with 74 strikeouts and 12 walks across 51 innings while converting 12 saves. Against SEC competition, he was dominant, recording a 1.59 ERA, 0.85 WHIP and a .160 opponent average while setting the conference freshman saves record. He now moves into a starting role, a shift that could redefine the shape of Texas' staff.

2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Carson Tinney*	Jr.	.348	.498	.753	158	17	53
1B	Josh Livingston*	G-Sr.	.284	.403	.555	211	15	48
2B	Ethan Mendoza	Jr.	.333	.437	.476	225	5	35
3B	Casey Borba	Jr.	.278	.410	.574	162	12	47
SS	Adrian Rodriguez	So.	.313	.410	.516	182	7	23
OF	Aiden Robbins*	Jr.	.422	.537	.652	204	6	38
OF	Ashton Larson*	Jr.	.256	.423	.487	39	2	12
OF	Jonah Williams	So.	.327	.383	.382	55	0	10
DH	Temo Becerra*	R-Sr.	.330	.384	.427	185	1	37

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Luke Harrison	G-Sr.	15	70.2	3.06	1.23	22.9	7.6
SP	Dylan Volantis	So.	1	51.0	1.94	0.88	37.6	6.1
SP	Ruger Riojas	Sr.	10	69.0	5.61	1.29	20.7	7.0
RP	Jason Flores	So.	5	32.1	2.78	1.02	19.6	7.2
RP	Thomas Burns	Jr.	0	26.2	3.71	1.24	35.1	14.0

9 TCU

Sawyer Strosnider

Last Season: *39-20 (19-11 Big 12); lost at Corvallis Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *NR*
Coach (record at school): *Kirk Saarloos (154-87, 5th season)*

STRENGTHS

TCU has found stability under **Kirk Saarloos**, who has won consistently since taking over the program in 2022. The Horned Frogs reached the College World Series in 2023 and followed with another postseason appearance last year after a 19-11 showing in Big 12 play. TCU secured the return of the vast majority of its 2025 roster, giving it one of the most experienced cores in the country, headlined by elite draft prospects **Sawyer Strosnider**, **Tommy LaPour** and **Chase Brunson**. Strosnider anchors the group after emerging as one of the nation's most productive freshmen in 2025 and establishing himself as one of the most coveted players in the 2026 draft class. Even with questions about his hit tool at the next level, his impact in college is proven. LaPour returns to the front of the rotation, bringing premium velocity and experience to a pitching staff that retains its entire projected starting group. The staff's familiarity with both the league and one another reduces early-season uncertainty and allows for more precise workload management. On the position side, nearly every projected starter is a returner. Projected starting first baseman **Rob Liddington** and DH **Kyuss Gargett** are the lone new faces expected to play regular roles.

WEAKNESSES

The question is not familiarity. It is translation. TCU exited the 2025 postseason without a win, and the returning roster carries that result forward. Another year of physical maturity often leads to improvement, but it is not automatic, particularly when expectations rise alongside experience. There is also some uncertainty in the bullpen. Key late-inning roles are expected to be filled by portal additions, including Cal Poly transfer **Tanner Sagouspie** and Hawaii transfer **Ethan Thomas**. Both will be asked to stabilize high-leverage situations quickly, and their ability to do so will help shape the season.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Sawyer Strosnider delivered a standout freshman season, slashing .350/.420/.650 with 13 doubles, 11 home runs and a nation-leading 10 triples to earn Big 12 freshman of the year honors. He pairs bat speed and pull-side power with a plus arm and plus speed. After earning second-team All-America honors in 2025, the draft-eligible sophomore could shift to center field full time and again dictate TCU's ceiling.

2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Nolan Traeger	So.	.327	.429	.472	159	3	17
1B	Rob Liddington*	G-Sr.	.359	.448	.675	206	15	50
2B	Cole Cramer	G-Sr.	.320	.433	.419	222	3	43
3B	Colton Griffin	Jr.	.266	.381	.415	94	2	14
SS	Jack Bell	Jr.	.259	.376	.453	139	5	31
OF	Sawyer Strosnider	So.	.350	.420	.650	220	11	51
OF	Chase Brunson	Jr.	.317	.395	.554	224	12	46
OF	Noah Franco	So.	.313	.396	.548	217	11	49
DH	Kyuss Gargett*	Jr.	.266	.343	.330	94	1	17

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Tommy LaPour	Jr.	16	90.1	3.09	1.16	23.4	7.2
SP	Mason Brassfield	So.	7	61.2	4.09	1.33	25.6	8.6
SP	Trever Baumler	So.	8	38.0	6.39	1.45	18.9	5.6
RP	Tanner Sagouspe*	Sr.	0	44.1	3.65	1.33	26.0	12.0
RP	Ethan Thomas*	So.	0	25.0	3.60	0.96	35.9	5.8

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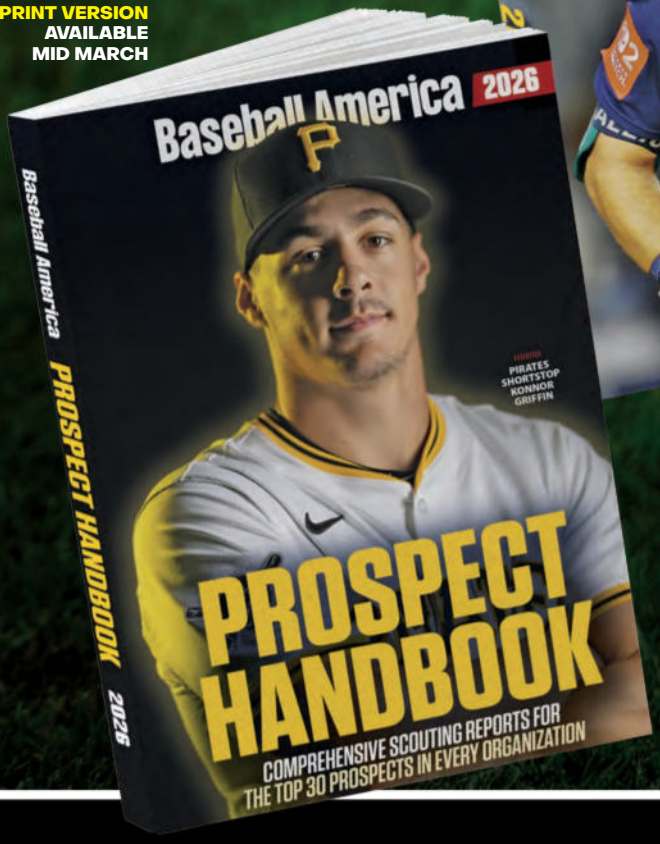

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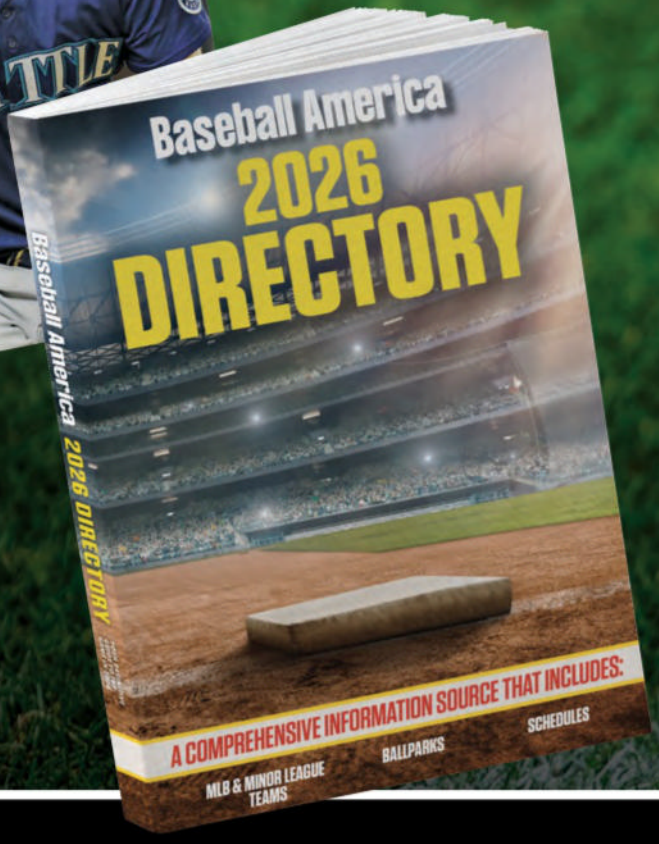

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10 ARKANSAS

Last Season: *50-15 (20-10 SEC); reached College World Series*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 3*
Coach (record at school): *Dave Van Horn (933-472, 24th season)*

Ryder Helfrick

STRENGTHS

Arkansas again found itself agonizingly close in 2025, eliminated by eventual national champion LSU on a misplayed ball that ended another season among the sport's highest tier. The response was familiar. Arkansas reloaded, reset and positioned itself for another run. Coach **Dave Van Horn's** teams have long proven capable of absorbing losses and recalibrating quickly. The 2026 roster reflects that same confidence, constructed with the expectation of competing deep into June once again. Pitching remains the program's organizing principle. Arkansas expects to again control games from the mound, beginning with righthander **Gabe Gaeckle** at the front of the rotation. He is backed by a lefthanded group of **Cole Gibler**, **Colin Fisher** and Vanderbilt transfer **Ethan McElvain**, giving Arkansas options rather than rigid assignments. The lineup carries its own collection of high-end talent. Catcher **Ryder Helfrick** enters the year as one of the program's top draft prospects after drawing strong reviews throughout the fall for his offensive impact and consistency behind the plate. Second baseman **Cam Kozeal** opens the season anchoring the middle of the infield. Slugger **Kuhio Aloy** returns after hitting 13 home runs and 15 doubles as a sophomore. Arkansas supplemented that core through the portal, adding infielders **TJ Pompey** and **Maika Niu** and outfielders **Zack Stewart** and **Damian Ruiz**.

WEAKNESSES

Arkansas led the nation in top 10-round selections, with top pitchers **Zach Root**, **Landon Beidelschies** and **Gage Wood** headlining a draft class that also pulled shortstop **Wehiwa Aloy**, outfielder **Charles Davalan** and reliever **Christian Foutch** into professional baseball, among others. That exodus leaves significant production to be replaced by players either new to the SEC or unaccustomed to everyday roles.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Gabe Gaeckle sits at the center of Arkansas' season. After opening last year in the rotation and struggling, he returned to the bullpen and dominated, posting a 2.06 ERA across 35 innings in relief. That performance confirmed the quality of his arsenal but did not resolve questions about his durability and efficiency as a starter. With heavy pitching losses to the draft, Arkansas now needs that conversion to hold. Whether it does will shape the Razorbacks' ceiling.

2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Ryder Helfrick	Jr.	.305	.420	.616	190	15	38
1B	Reese Robinett	R-Jr.	.260	.400	.438	73	3	13
2B	Cam Kozeal	Jr.	.333	.386	.606	231	15	62
3B	TJ Pompey*	Jr.	.348	.397	.623	69	5	15
SS	Nolan Souza	Jr.	.250	.374	.427	96	4	22
OF	Maika Niu*	Sr.	.276	.343	.560	243	15	52
OF	Zack Stewart*	Sr.	.269	.371	.495	182	11	31
OF	Kuhio Aloy	Jr.	.317	.404	.539	243	13	70
DH	Damian Ruiz*	Jr.	.388	.511	.607	214	7	46

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Gabe Gaeckle	Jr.	9	71.1	4.42	1.32	29.9	10.1
SP	Cole Gibler	So.	0	29.1	3.99	1.26	44.5	9.4
SP	Colin Fisher	Jr.	5	25.1	4.62	1.26	28.7	11.1
RP	Ethan McElvain*	Jr.	5	27.1	7.24	2.16	31.0	19.3
RP	Parker Coil	Jr.	0	21.1	1.27	1.12	27.0	2.2

11 COASTAL CAROLINA

Last Season: *56-14 (26-4 Sun Belt); national runner-up*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 2*
Coach (record at school): *Kevin Schnall (56-14, 2nd season)*

Cameron Flukey

STRENGTHS

Coastal Carolina in 2025 authored a historic season under first-year coach **Kevin Schnall**, who stepped seamlessly into the role. Schnall set a new program single-season wins record, opened the NCAA Tournament with eight consecutive victories and finished with 56 wins, the most ever by a first-year Division I head coach. He capped that run by becoming the first coach to earn BA Coach of the Year honors in his inaugural season. In 2026, Coastal Carolina fields a pitching staff capable of matching any in the country. **Cameron Flukey** sits at the center of that group with a case as the best starting pitcher in college baseball. His presence alone tilts series, particularly within the Sun Belt, where few teams can counter his combination of power, command and durability. Lefthander **Hayden Johnson** returns as an excellent No. 2 option, giving Coastal a front-end pairing built to suppress offense over extended stretches. Georgia State transfer **Ross Norman** rounds out the rotation as a steady third starter, providing depth rather than dependence. In the bullpen, **Ryan Lynch**, **Dominick Carbone** and **Darin Horn** all return, giving Schnall experienced late-inning options.

WEAKNESSES

Catcher **Caden Bodine's** exit removes an elite defensive presence whose impact extended far beyond the box score. No catcher in the nation was more effective in stealing strikes or managing a pitching staff in 2025. That skill set drove his first-round selection and subsequent trade to the Rays, an organization known for valuing defensive catchers. For a team built on pitching, losing its on-field conductor carries real weight. Coastal will replace Bodine with a committee approach, leaning on projected starter **Brice Estep**, sophomore **Domenico Tozzi** and Texas transfer **Cole Chamberlain**. Early returns on Estep have been positive, but replacing Bodine's influence is a significant challenge.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Cameron Flukey steps into the spotlight after a dominant sophomore season in which he threw 101.2 innings with a 3.19 ERA and 118 strikeouts against 24 walks. A righthander who touches 98 mph, he pairs power with a deep arsenal. His mid-70s curveball emerged as a separator in 2025, producing a 49% miss rate, while a slider with tilt and a firm changeup give him answers in any count. Few pitchers have a higher ceiling or clearer path to controlling games.

2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Brice Estep	Jr.	.227	.346	.455	22	1	5
1B	Colby Thorndyke	R-Jr.	.303	.395	.445	211	4	48
2B	Blake Barthol	Sr.	.274	.387	.468	252	12	53
3B	Walker Mitchell	Jr.	.270	.443	.373	204	4	45
SS	Ty Barrango	R-Sr.	.241	.373	.354	79	2	19
OF	Blagen Pado	Jr.	.267	.364	.543	116	8	31
OF	Dean Mihos	Sr.	.332	.418	.453	190	3	22
OF	Jordan Taylor*	Sr.	.322	.359	.504	242	8	43
DH	Rex Watson*	So.	.295	.400	.532	190	13	60

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Cameron Flukey	Jr.	17	101.2	3.19	1.00	28.5	5.8
SP	Hayden Johnson	Jr.	0	38.1	2.82	1.20	32.9	10.8
SP	Ross Norman*	Jr.	12	68.0	7.68	1.72	20.6	9.4
RP	Ryan Lynch	G-Sr.	3	61.1	2.93	1.13	27.2	9.4
RP	Dominick Carbone	Jr.	0	42.0	2.36	1.10	29.9	5.2

EDDIE KELLY (HELFRICK), FSU ATHLETICS (BEARD), PHOTO COURTESY TENNESSEE (FORD), JAY BIGGERSTAFF/GETTY IMAGES (FLUKEY)

12 FLORIDA STATE

Trey Beard

Last Season: *42-16 (17-10 ACC); lost at Corvallis Super Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 11*
Coach (record at school): *Link Jarrett (114-64, 4th season)*

STRENGTHS

Link Jarrett's tenure at Florida State has accelerated quickly. An unsightly 23-31 start in 2023 now reads as a prologue before consecutive deep postseason runs, including a College World Series appearance in 2024 and a super regional trip last spring. The Seminoles enter 2026 facing meaningful turnover, most notably the loss of ace **Jamie Arnold**, but the broader structure remains intact. Florida State again profiles as a pitching-driven team with a roster built to withstand attrition, pairing depth on the mound with an offense led by one of the nation's premier power bats. Losing Arnold and No. 2 starter **Joey Volini** stripped Florida State of one of the nation's most effective duos, but Jarrett responded decisively through the portal, landing prized former Florida Atlantic lefthander **Trey Beard**. Beard brings strikeout production and deception, having punched out 118 batters against 32 walks across 86 innings in 2025. His arrival stabilizes the front of the rotation and provides a different look in an ACC environment defined by velocity. Junior **Wes Mendes** returns, while transfers **Bryson Moore**, **Brodie Purcell** and **Cole Stokes** lengthen a group built to manage innings.

WEAKNESSES

First baseman **Myles Bailey** provides a clear anchor after producing elite exit velocities and hitting 19 home runs as a freshman in 2025. Even with strikeout concerns, his power profile gives Florida State a middle-of-the-order presence few teams can match. Beyond Bailey, questions multiply. Catcher **Hunter Carns** returns after a strong offensive season, and third baseman **Cal Fisher** and outfielder **Chase Williams** provide experience, with Williams adding value on the bases. Past that, the picture blurs. Outfielder **Brody DeLamielleure** flashed power but hit .245, while USC transfer **Brayden Dowd** faces a significant jump after producing in the Big Ten. Freshmen **Kelvyn Paulino** and **John Stuetzer** impressed in the fall, but relying on first-year players carries inherent risk.

PLAYER TO KNOW

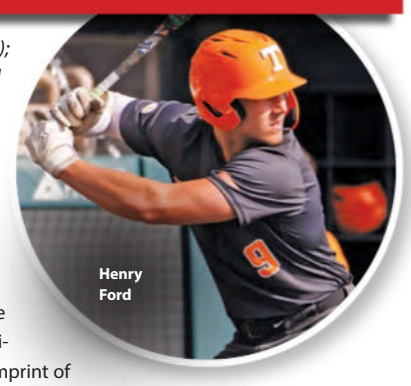
Hayden Beard enters the season as one of the more distinctive arms in college baseball. He features the highest release point among lefthanders who pitched in Division I last year and pairs it with advanced offspeed feel, driving a 33.7% strikeout rate. Velocity is not his calling card, and the ACC presents a stiffer test, but evaluators remain optimistic as he steps onto a larger stage.

2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Hunter Carns	So.	.286	.379	.481	133	6	15
1B	Myles Bailey	So.	.327	.441	.663	202	19	56
2B	Kelvyn Paulino	Fr.	HS—Bradenton, Fla.					
3B	Cal Fisher	Jr.	.303	.411	.489	188	8	37
SS	Gabe Fraser*	So.	.250	.339	.365	52	1	12
OF	Brayden Dowd*	Jr.	.324	.446	.524	225	10	36
OF	Chase Williams	Jr.	.342	.394	.474	114	2	20
OF	Brody DeLamielleure	R-So.	.245	.280	.464	110	6	21
DH	John Stuetzer	Fr.	HS—Marietta, Ga.					

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Trey Beard*	Jr.	15	86.0	3.14	1.08	33.7	9.1
SP	Wes Mendes	Jr.	16	78.0	5.42	1.40	26.3	11.4
SP	Bryson Moore*	Jr.	4	18.1	3.44	1.20	27.3	10.4
RP	Brodie Purcell*	Jr.	0	42.2	2.11	1.05	29.7	11.0
RP	John Abraham	Jr.	1	33.0	4.64	1.70	26.4	15.1

13 TENNESSEE


Henry Ford

Last Season: *46-19 (16-14 SEC); lost at Fayetteville Super Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 12*
Coach (record at school): *Josh Elander (1st season)*

STRENGTHS

Josh Elander steps into the Tennessee coaching job with an unusually strong runway. The roster he inherits is deep, experienced and balanced, the final imprint of **Tony Vitello**, whose abrupt departure to manage the San Francisco Giants reshaped the program's future. For a coach thrust unexpectedly into a pressure role, the circumstances could be far harsher. Tennessee's roster depth traces directly to the recruiting transformation engineered under Vitello, who turned the Volunteers into a national destination after decades of relative anonymity. Catcher **Stone Lawless**, first baseman **Levi Clark**, infielders **Manny Marin** and **Ariel Antigua** and outfielders **Chris Newstrom** and **Reese Chapman** all return from a super regional team. On the mound, pitchers **Tegan Kuhns** and **Brandon Arvidson** bring back innings and role clarity, stabilizing a staff that does not need to be rebuilt. Tennessee then layered aggressively on top of that foundation. Third baseman **Henry Ford**, an early-round draft candidate who elected to return to college, adds high-upside impact. **Garrett Wright** arrives from Wright State with the versatility to catch or play center field, while **Blaine Brown** brings two-way ability. The pitching staff was also reinforced through the portal with **Evan Blanco**, **Landon Mack**, **Bo Rhudy** and **Brady Frederick**, creating depth that allows Elander to manage workloads rather than chase outs.

WEAKNESSES

Elander is widely respected and well regarded internally, but replacing a program-defining figure like Vitello is a seismic shift regardless of preparation. First-time head coaches often face a learning curve that has little to do with baseball and everything to do with decision-making, delegation and expectation management. That transition could prove seamless, particularly with a veteran roster, or it could surface in subtle ways over the course of a long season.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Henry Ford enters the season with significant, high-major production to his name. He hit .362/.420/.575 with 11 home runs and nine doubles at Virginia in 2025, then chose Tennessee over going pro. After spending last season in the outfield, Ford is expected to return to third base, where his arm strength and offensive profile fit cleanly. As a draft-eligible player again, his performance will help to shape both Tennessee's lineup and his own trajectory.

2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Stone Lawless	R-So.	.288	.468	.644	59	5	20
1B	Levi Clark	So.	.289	.459	.594	128	10	34
2B	Manny Marin	So.	.283	.356	.401	152	3	23
3B	Henry Ford*	Jr.	.362	.420	.575	207	11	46
SS	Ariel Antigua	Jr.	.192	.302	.205	73	0	11
OF	Jay Abernathy	So.	.282	.409	.340	103	1	11
OF	Garrett Wright*	Jr.	.406	.513	.663	202	8	48
OF	Chris Newstrom	So.	.351	.433	.684	57	5	19
DH	Blaine Brown*	So.	.292	.362	.493	209	10	38

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Tegan Kuhns	So.	10	36.2	5.40	1.61	23.7	9.5
SP	Evan Blanco*	So.	8	39.0	6.23	1.72	19.9	5.0
SP	Landon Mack*	So.	15	80.1	4.03	1.22	20.6	5.0
RP	Bo Rhudy*	Jr.	1	37.0	3.16	0.92	30.6	3.5
RP	Brady Frederick*	Jr.	0	77.2	2.67	0.89	24.9	6.2

14 VIRGINIA

Last Season: *32-18 (16-11 ACC); missed NCAA Tournament*
Final 2025 Ranking: *NR*
Coach (record at school): *Chris Pollard (1st season)*

AJ Gracia

STRENGTHS

Virginia found itself on the wrong side of the offseason's most consequential coaching move, losing **Brian O'Connor** to Mississippi State after more than two decades of continuity. The Cavaliers turned quickly to **Chris Pollard**, the architect of Duke's rise, and backed the hire by expanding resources to match the program's ambitions. Pollard arrived with a core of trusted players from Duke, supplemented through the transfer portal and stabilized by the return of several O'Connor-era contributors. While many portal-heavy rosters are defined by uncertainty, this one is built largely on familiarity with the ACC. The roster's spine runs through Pollard's former Duke players, led by outfielder **AJ Gracia**, one of the most sought-after position players in the 2026 draft class. Gracia anchors a group that includes **Sam Harris**, **Noah Murray**, **Kyle Johnson** and pitchers **Henry Zatkowski** and **Max Stammel**, all of whom bring proven ACC experience. Stability also came from retention. Shortstop **Eric Becker** remained in Charlottesville through the coaching change, joined by outfielder **Harrison Didawick** and projected DH **Aiden Harris**. Virginia further strengthened its infield by landing Rider transfer **Joe Tiroly**, one of the most coveted middle-infield bats in the portal. His addition adds force to the lineup's center. The pitching staff reflects a similar transfer-heavy mix. Several arms arrive with established track records, while others, including **Lucas Hartman** from Western Kentucky and **Tyler Kapa** from Eastern Michigan, are moving up a level.

WEAKNESSES

Pollard inherits higher expectations, deeper scrutiny and a broader stage, and the roster must absorb that shift alongside him. The fit appears natural, but scale matters, particularly early. On the mound, Virginia leans more heavily on pitchers without ACC experience than it does at the plate, creating an early storyline. How quickly those arms translate will shape the team's trajectory.

PLAYER TO KNOW

AJ Gracia enters the year with an offensive profile tailored for impact. In his final season at Duke, he produced a 90 mph average exit velocity with a 105 mph 90th percentile mark, pairing consistent barrel rates with disciplined swing decisions. He chased infrequently, maintained a near-90% zone-contact rate and an 86.4% overall contact rate while lifting his best contact with intent. The aggression can tick up, but the foundation is firm.

2026 LINEUP

**Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Noah Jouras*	G-Sr.	.319	.444	.505	182	7	28
1B	Sam Harris*	Jr.	.297	.385	.563	128	9	42
2B	Joe Tiroly*	Jr.	.377	.481	.749	199	18	70
3B	Noah Murray*	Jr.	.342	.500	.632	38	3	10
SS	Eric Becker	Jr.	.368	.453	.617	201	9	52
OF	AJ Gracia*	Jr.	.293	.449	.558	215	15	54
OF	Kyle Johnson*	Jr.	.220	.343	.508	59	4	19
OF	Harrison Didawick	Sr.	.225	.327	.384	138	6	28
DH	Aiden Harris	So.	.400	.500	.500	10	0	3

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO	BB
SP	Henry Zatkowski*	So.	11	59.2	4.83	1.29	22.1	4.6
SP	Max Stammel*	So.	1	22.0	4.09	1.41	24.8	11.9
SP	Tyler Kapa*	G-Sr.	14	66.0	6.82	1.88	27.9	11.5
RP	Lucas Hartman*	G-Sr.	1	53.1	2.70	1.05	28.6	10.1
RP	Matt Augustin	Jr.	Did not play					

15 OREGON STATE

Last Season: *48-16-1; reached College World Series*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 5*
Coach (record at school): *Mitch Canham (224-103-1, 7th season)*

Dax Whitney

STRENGTHS

Oregon State enters its second season as an NCAA independent having already validated the experiment. Year one outside a conference ended in a return to the College World Series, the program's first under **Mitch Canham** since he succeeded Pat Casey in 2020. Much of the roster that carried Oregon State to Omaha returns, particularly on the mound. There are notable departures from the lineup, but this season will be shaped primarily by pitching strength and the degree to which the offense can evolve. Everything about Oregon State's roster points toward its rotation. Sophomore righthander **Dax Whitney** and junior lefthander **Ethan Kleinschmit** return as one of the most imposing starting duos in college baseball. Whitney was one of the sport's most advanced freshmen in 2025, posting a 3.40 ERA with 120 strikeouts against 37 walks over 76.2 innings. He worked with pace, challenged hitters early and carried his stuff deep into outings. Kleinschmit, a junior college transfer, provided parallel value over a heavier workload, finishing with a 3.56 ERA and 113 strikeouts against 36 walks across 91 innings. Together, they produced the second-most strikeouts by a rotation pair in the country, trailing only LSU's top duo, and they return intact. **Eric Segura's** presence behind them adds another layer of proven potency. On the West Coast, only a handful of programs can counter that kind of pressure from the mound.

WEAKNESSES

All-America shortstop **Aiva Arquette** departed for the draft, joined by outfielders **Gavin Turley**, **Dallas Macias** and **Canon Reeder** and catcher **Wilson Weber**. Infielder **Trent Caraway** transferred to LSU, removing both production and familiarity from the middle of the order. There is still depth, but Oregon State will lean more heavily on younger players and transfers to fill big roles.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Dax Whitney's fastball sits in the mid 90s and reaches 98 mph with riding life that plays at the top of the zone, and his breaking mix gives hitters little margin for adjustment. A top-down curveball provides sharp depth, while his sweeping slider averaged more than 17 inches of horizontal break and produced a 42% whiff rate in 2025. Whitney consistently challenged the strike zone too, limiting free passes while maintaining swing-and-miss.

2026 LINEUP

**Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Jacob Galloway*	Sr.	.220	.286	.320	50	1	7
1B	Jacob Krieg	Sr.	.245	.360	.500	200	14	37
2B	AJ Singer	Sr.	.312	.409	.393	234	3	39
3B	Ethan Porter	Fr.	HS—Huntington Beach, Calif.					
SS	Tyler Inge*	So.	.217	.342	.267	60	0	10
OF	Easton Talt	Sr.	.261	.433	.460	211	8	36
OF	Adam Haight	So.	.000	.167	.000	5	0	0
OF	Nyan Hayes*	Sr.	.277	.421	.490	206	10	45
DH	Mason Pike	Fr.	HS—Puyallup, Wash.					

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO	BB
SP	Dax Whitney	So.	17	76.2	3.40	1.28	36.4	11.2
SP	Ethan Kleinschmit	Jr.	17	91.0	3.56	1.09	30.1	9.6
SP	Eric Segura	Jr.	5	58.1	4.63	1.51	28.8	14.0
RP	AJ Hutcheson	Sr.	0	48.1	4.28	1.20	19.1	7.0
RP	Wyatt Queen	Jr.	5	47.2	3.21	1.24	31.1	9.7

PHOTO COURTESY VIRGINIA (GRACIA), BILL MITCHELL (WHITNEY), BRIAN WESTERHOLT/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (ELLIOTT), DANNY PARKER/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (FENNELL)

16 OLE MISS

Last Season: *43-21 (16-14 SEC); lost at Oxford Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 19*
Coach (record at school): *Mike Bianco (949-565-1, 26th season)*

Hunter Elliott

STRENGTHS

Ole Miss' path since its national title has been uneven. The Rebels followed that championship with back-to-back losing seasons in 2023 and 2024, then rebounded with 43 wins in 2025. The surface calm did not last. An early exit from their own regional reopened questions that many assumed had already been answered, particularly about whether recent volatility was anomaly or trend. **Mike Bianco** enters his 26th season with a roster that reflects urgency rather than rebuild. Talent is abundant, and several notable returners altered the offseason calculus. This roster is old, and intentionally so. Ole Miss leans heavily on veteran depth across the diamond, with a lineup and rotation populated by juniors and seniors who have already lived through the SEC grind. Catcher **Austin Fawley**, first baseman **Will Furniss**, second baseman **Dom Decker**, third baseman **Judd Utermark**, shortstop **Brayden Randle**, outfielders **Daniel Pacella**, **Tristan Bissetta** and **Hayden Federico** and DH **Owen Paino** all return. Many of those players are nearing or past 23 years old, and most were already contributors in Oxford last season. On the mound, that same experience carries over. **Hunter Elliott's** return was among the most significant decisions of the offseason, giving Ole Miss a proven, All-America-caliber starter to open weekends. **Cade Townsend** also returns, providing continuity behind Elliott.

WEAKNESSES

Ole Miss exited its own regional last season with a roster that looks largely familiar, and that result cannot be dismissed as a one-off when viewed alongside the prior two years. The question is not talent but translation. Can this group break through the pattern and push deeper when it matters most? There is also the weight of expectation. Ole Miss plays in a demanding environment, and after two losing seasons followed by a premature postseason exit, patience is thin. If early results falter, outside pressure could test the Rebels.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Huntern Elliott pitched to a 2.94 ERA with 102 strikeouts against 40 walks across 85.2 innings and had a clear path to professional baseball before choosing to return. He does not overpower hitters in the way some SEC aces do, but his ability to manage games, control tempo and deliver reliability at the front of the rotation gives Ole Miss a known commodity every weekend.

2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Austin Fawley	Jr.	.256	.386	.648	176	21	53
1B	Will Furniss	Sr.	.305	.424	.517	203	12	47
2B	Dom Decker*	Jr.	.351	.496	.464	211	0	48
3B	Judd Utermark	Sr.	.294	.376	.599	252	22	69
SS	Brayden Randle	Jr.	.286	.378	.386	70	1	10
OF	Tristan Bissetta*	Sr.	.227	.358	.373	75	3	16
OF	Daniel Pacella*	Sr.	.355	.429	.714	231	20	59
OF	Hayden Federico	So.	.243	.389	.343	181	4	23
DH	Owen Paino	So.	.236	.348	.345	55	1	7
Pos	**Pitcher**	**Year**	**GS**	**IP**	**ERA**	**WHIP**	**SO**	**BB**
SP	Hunter Elliott	Sr.	16	85.2	2.94	1.16	28.3	11.1
SP	Owen Kelly*	Jr.	15	80.0	4.61	1.35	21.9	8.1
SP	Cade Townsend	So.	8	34.0	6.35	1.41	28.1	13.1
RP	Walker Hooks	So.	2	37.1	4.82	1.47	25.4	7.1
RP	Wil Libbert*	So.	11	53.2	6.04	1.64	21.6	12.9

17 VANDERBILT

Last Season: *43-18 (19-11 SEC); lost at Nashville Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 17*
Coach (record at school): *Tim Corbin (964-461-1, 24th season)*

Connor Fennell

STRENGTHS

Sustained success, rigorous standards and institutional continuity have long defined Vanderbilt, which is why the abrupt ending to 2025 still resonates. The Commodores entered the NCAA Tournament as the No. 1 national seed, then were eliminated swiftly by No. 4 seed Wright State. What happened next was familiar. Significant talent departed via the draft, but coach **Tim Corbin** again treated turnover as recalibration rather than reset. Vanderbilt supplemented through the portal, retained several core contributors and retooled its coaching staff. The through line remains pitching. Vanderbilt continues to assemble deep, high-ceiling staffs, even in the wake of losing frontline arms like **JD Thompson** and **Cody Bowker**. The next wave is already in place. **Austin Nye**, **Connor Fennell**, **Luke Guth**, **Nate Taylor** and **Miller Green** return with the kind of raw stuff that has long thrived in Nashville. That group offers variety. There is power, feel and enough depth to manage innings without exposing soft spots. Under pitching coach **Scott Brown**, Vanderbilt has consistently translated arm talent into production, and this staff again reflects that developmental track record. There is also reason to watch the lineup more closely than in recent seasons. Third baseman **Brodie Johnston** brings the type of raw power that can alter games. His challenge is refinement, particularly trimming chase and converting strength into damage.

WEAKNESSES

Vanderbilt has struggled in recent years to generate SEC-level power, with home runs often difficult to come by due to roster construction and approach rather than environment alone. That imbalance has placed a heavy burden on the pitching staff, shrinking margins in postseason play. Corbin addressed that issue by reshaping the offensive staff, hiring program alum **Jason Esposito** to oversee hitting. Corbin has expressed optimism about Esposito's modern language and approach, but philosophical shifts must translate between the lines.

PLAYER TO KNOW

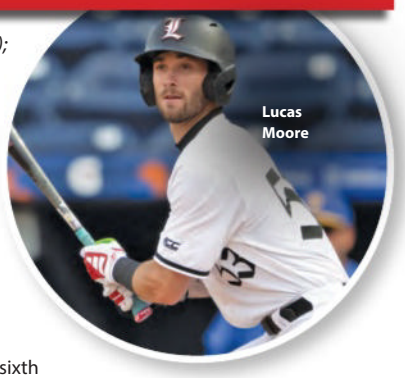
Connor Fennell delivered immediate impact in his first season after transferring from Dayton, posting a 2.53 ERA with 84 strikeouts against just 11 walks over 53.1 innings. His success stemmed from command and pitch mix rather than velocity alone. With a chance to move into a full-time starting role, Fennell now occupies an important place in shaping Vanderbilt's next pitching group.

2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Colin Barczi	Jr.	.253	.307	.439	198	8	39
1B	Max Jensen*	G-Sr.	.284	.430	.582	67	5	15
2B	Mike Mancini	Sr.	.269	.398	.393	145	4	24
3B	Brodie Johnston	So.	.260	.297	.534	223	15	55
SS	Ryker Waite	So.	.000	.500	.000	3	0	1
OF	Braden Holcomb	Jr.	.275	.378	.503	153	9	34
OF	Logan Johnstone*	G-Sr.	.337	.439	.571	196	9	40
OF	Rustan Rigdon	So.	.259	.431	.346	162	2	25
DH	Mack Whitcomb*	Jr.	.360	.485	.649	211	15	55
Pos	**Pitcher**	**Year**	**GS**	**IP**	**ERA**	**WHIP**	**SO**	**BB**
SP	Austin Nye	So.	15	50.2	3.55	1.24	26.9	10.2
SP	Connor Fennell	Jr.	7	53.1	2.53	0.83	40.8	5.3
SP	Luke Guth	Jr.	0	19.1	0.93	0.83	29.7	9.5
RP	Nate Taylor*	So.	0	8.1	1.08	0.60	54.8	6.5
RP	Miller Green	Jr.	0	23.2	3.80	1.52	26.2	10.3

18 LOUISVILLE

Last Season: *42-24 (15-15 ACC); reached College World Series*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 4*
Coach (record at school): *Dan McDonnell (784-353-1, 20th season)*


Lucas Moore

STRENGTHS

Louisville continues to live in rare air under **Dan McDonnell**. In 2025, the Cardinals reached the College World Series for the sixth time in his tenure. The missing piece remains a national title, an absence that stands out precisely because of the program's consistency at the sport's highest level. Louisville returned much of its core and avoided a heavy reliance on the transfer portal, placing it in a shrinking group of programs capable of sustaining relevance without annual reconstruction. Louisville's identity begins with movement. Speed, athleticism and opportunistic power are distributed throughout the lineup, creating pressure that compounds quickly. Few teams manufacture stress as consistently. Outfielder **Lucas Moore** is central to that approach. A top 50 prospect in the 2025 draft, Moore hit .339/.430/.454 with five home runs, 10 doubles and three triples, but his impact extends far beyond contact. He stole 53 bases in 54 attempts last season, pushing his career total to 70 of 75, and routinely turns singles into scoring chances. His presence in center field also shrinks space defensively. **Zion Rose** adds a similar profile with more pop at the dish. He hit 13 home runs with 16 doubles while stealing 31 of 34 bases in 2025. Louisville's limited portal work was targeted and productive. Former Ohio outfielder **Ben Slanker** arrives after hitting 21 home runs. Infielder **AJ Martin** comes from Charleston Southern after a 12-homer, 13-steal season.

WEAKNESSES

Ace **Patrick Forbes**, third baseman **Jake Munroe**, catcher **Matt Klein**, pitchers **Tucker Biven** and **Justin West** and outfielder **Eddie King Jr.** all departed via the draft, stripping the roster of its most experienced rotation leader and several stabilizing offensive pieces. There is enough returning talent to soften that blow, and the portal additions help balance the lineup, but replacing both innings and reliability is rarely seamless.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Lucas Moore's ability to impact games on the bases and in center field gives Louisville a table-setter who influences every inning. The Cardinals led all high-major programs in stolen bases last season with 162 while being caught just 22 times. Moore is the standard-bearer for that aggression, and how closely the roster mirrors his pace will set the tempo for Louisville's offensive rhythm.

2026 LINEUP

**Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	George Baker		.111	.231	.222	45	1	5
1B	Tague Davis	So.	.283	.390	.571	219	18	52
2B	AJ Martin*	Sr.	.316	.414	.557	212	12	53
3B	Bayram Hot	Sr.	.326	.382	.457	92	3	22
SS	Alex Alicea	Jr.	.307	.444	.401	202	1	25
OF	Lucas Moore	Jr.	.339	.430	.454	271	5	49
OF	Zion Rose	Jr.	.310	.396	.552	252	13	67
OF	Ben Slanker*	Jr.	.302	.422	.720	182	21	69
DH	Kaden Schoenly	Fr.	HS—Mechanicsburg, Pa.					

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Jacob Bean	Jr.	15	75.0	4.20	1.25	22.0	6.7
SP	Ethan Eberle	So.	10	62.0	4.65	1.40	21.6	9.2
SP	Peter Michael	Sr.	13	50.1	4.83	1.51	22.7	16.2
RP	Jake Schweitzer	So.	0	42.1	2.34	1.18	12.8	10.6
RP	Wyatt Danilowicz	Sr.	0	33.1	2.70	1.32	35.9	17.2

19 OKLAHOMA

Last Season: *38-22 (14-16 SEC); lost at Chapel Hill Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *NR*
Coach (record at school): *Skip Johnson (267-175, 9th season)*

LJ Mercurius

STRENGTHS

Oklahoma's first season in the SEC was more stabilizing than spectacular, and that alone carried value. The Sooners finished with 38 wins and a 14-16 league record, avoiding the turbulence that often accompanies a conference jump of that magnitude. Oklahoma belonged, even if the ceiling remained out of reach. The follow-up has been assertive. The Sooners signed a quartet of top 100 transfers and added several other players capable of contributing immediately, while also bringing back a meaningful portion of their 2025 offensive production. The offense projects as Oklahoma's most reliable component. Several core contributors return with SEC experience already banked, beginning with first baseman **Dayton Tockey**, second baseman **Kyle Branch**, shortstop **Jaxon Willits** and outfielder **Jason Walk**. That group provides stability across the infield and outfield and allows the lineup to function without forcing unfamiliar roles. The portal additions were targeted rather than sweeping. Mississippi State transfer **Nolan Stevens**, Nebraska transfer **Cayden Brumbaugh** and Wichita State transfer **Camden Johnson** arrive with production in hand. Stevens and Brumbaugh both bring high-major track records, while Johnson adds depth and lineup flexibility.

WEAKNESSES

Kyson Witherspoon's departure leaves a void that cannot be filled directly. He functioned as both an innings-eater and a tone-setter, throwing 95 frames with a 2.65 ERA, 124 strikeouts and just 23 walks. There is no one-for-one replacement. UNLV transfer **LJ Mercurius** has drawn strong offseason reviews and offers upside, but Witherspoon's impact was structural, not just statistical. Oklahoma will need to assemble outs by committee and discover which arms can handle extended responsibility against SEC lineups.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Jaxon Willits has been Oklahoma's everyday shortstop since arriving on campus and enters the season as one of the roster's most established pieces. He has produced a .286/.394/.490 line with 19 home runs and 21 doubles across his first two seasons. The switch-hitter's approach stands out more than raw tools, particularly from the left side, where his swing is more rhythmic and controlled. After the 2025 season, Willits reinforced that profile with a strong 13-game Cape Cod League stint, hitting .366/.534/.488.

2026 LINEUP

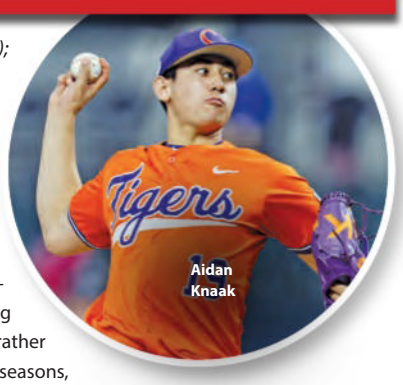
**Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Deiten Lachance	Jr.	Transfer—McLennan (Texas) JC					
1B	Dayton Tockey	Sr.	.271	.382	.472	144	7	32
2B	Kyle Branch	So.	.288	.357	.365	222	2	33
3B	Camden Johnson*	Jr.	.325	.402	.433	231	2	35
SS	Jaxon Willits	Jr.	.302	.409	.495	222	9	48
OF	Jason Walk	Jr.	.267	.386	.475	221	9	37
OF	Nolan Stevens*	Jr.	.320	.414	.500	100	4	21
OF	Drew Dickerson	So.	.309	.424	.568	81	5	19
DH	Cayden Brumbaugh*	Sr.	.309	.388	.451	246	5	33

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	LJ Mercurius*	Jr.	11	53.0	3.57	1.32	25.7	11.1
SP	Mason Bixby*	Jr.	1	18.1	5.89	1.80	25.5	21.3
SP	Cameron Johnson	Jr.	0	7.0	18.00	3.14	20.5	20.5
RP	Reid Hensley	G-Sr.	2	33.2	2.94	1.19	26.6	10.8
RP	Jaden Barfield	So.	3	22.2	3.57	1.46	20.2	9.6

BENJAMIN RUSH/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (MOORE), PHOTO COURTESY OKLAHOMA (MERCURIUS), EDDIE KELLY (KWAAK), MIKE JAMES/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (MEYER)

20 CLEMSON



Last Season: *45-18 (18-12 ACC); lost at Clemson Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 24*
Coach (record at school): *Erik Bakich (133-53, 4th season)*

STRENGTHS

Clemson has moved steadily forward under **Erik Bakich**, building credibility through consistency rather than flashes. Over his first three seasons, the Tigers have won 133 games, reached a super regional in 2024 and remained competitive annually. Clemson retained much of its core while making targeted portal additions. The result is a team with enough depth to contend deep into June, even as the path through a loaded conference remains unforgiving. Clemson returns a staff capable of absorbing innings and controlling series, beginning with third-year ace **Aidan Knaak**. His calling card is one of the most effective changeups in college baseball, a pitch that allows him to neutralize hitters without needing to overpower them. **Drew Titsworth** also returns after a strong 2025 campaign in which he worked primarily out of the bullpen. He is expected to move into a weekend rotation role alongside Knaak, giving Clemson a front-end pairing that blends reliability with swing-and-miss potential. The broader pitching profile was sharpened deliberately. Clemson emphasized development this fall, shifting resources toward lab-based refinement rather than pure workload. The approach mirrors the model Bakich employed at Michigan during its run to the 2019 national championship series.

WEAKNESSES

Several projected offensive contributors arrive from lower-major backgrounds, including outfielder **Nate Savoie** from Loyola Marymount and **Ty Dalley** from Mercer. Both bring tools, but translating that production to a higher level is rarely seamless. There are also internal variables. **Collin Priest** offers size and raw power, but passivity has limited his impact at times. Clemson has hitters with ingredients, but fewer with established track records against elite pitching.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Aidan Knaak has been Clemson's stabilizing force atop the rotation for two seasons, built around elite feel for his changeup. The pitch arrives with late fade and tumble. He throws it with conviction and consistent arm speed, allowing it to play in any count. In TrackMan games, his changeup generated a 50% whiff rate and a 36% chase rate, numbers that reflect both deception and command. It is a dependable separator in a class where few offspeed pitches carry that level of reliability.

2026 LINEUP

**Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Jacob Jarrell	Sr.	.263	.387	.515	198	15	41
1B	Luke Gaffney	Jr.	.271	.357	.388	188	5	39
2B	Jarren Purify	Jr.	.298	.417	.462	208	6	35
3B	Tryston McCladdie	Jr.	.287	.393	.511	94	5	19
SS	Tyler Lichtenberger*	So.	.341	.410	.468	205	3	37
OF	Nate Savoie*	So.	.300	.384	.675	203	20	61
OF	Ty Dalley*	Sr.	.273	.352	.588	245	19	61
OF	Jack Crighton	Sr.	.287	.370	.378	143	1	19
DH	Collin Priest	Jr.	.240	.407	.480	196	12	52

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Aidan Knaak	Jr.	16	90.1	4.18	1.11	28.7	7.6
SP	Drew Titsworth	Jr.	7	54.2	4.28	1.39	21.1	8.0
SP	Talan Bell	So.	8	22.2	5.56	1.63	20.4	13.9
RP	Joe Allen	Sr.	0	29.1	1.84	1.26	25.4	13.5
RP	Jacob McGovern	Jr.	2	35.0	3.86	0.91	30.8	8.4

21 WEST VIRGINIA

Last Season: *44-16 (19-9 Big 12); lost at Baton Rouge Super Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 13*
Coach (record at school): *Steve Sabins (44-16, 2nd season)*

STRENGTHS

West Virginia's first season under **Steven Sabins** set a promising baseline. The Mountaineers retained several contributors from that group, but the real transformation came through the transfer portal. The result is a roster that looks materially different from a year ago and far more ambitious in construction. Sabins leaned heavily into upside, targeting players whose production curves are still forming. On the offensive side, returning hitters like **Armani Guzman** provide contact quality and on-base skill, establishing a baseline of offensive competence even if power remains limited. From there, West Virginia layered in a diverse group of portal additions. Ohio transfer **Matt Ineich**, junior college bat **Tyrus Hall**, Georgia Southern transfer **Sean Smith**, Ohio State transfer **Matthew Graveline** and UNCW transfer **Brock Wills** all arrive with distinct profiles. Collectively, they give West Virginia options and create internal competition across the order. The pitching staff mirrors that construction. **Andrew Middleton**, **Dawson Montesa** and **Bryce Thacker** headline a group that offers raw traits more than established certainty. Montesa arrives from Division II, Thacker brings length and projection and Middleton stands out as one of the most analytically intriguing arms to change uniforms this offseason. There is real swing-and-miss potential here, even if polish lags.

WEAKNESSES

Several Mountaineers pitchers are transitioning either from lower levels or limited roles, and early inconsistency would not be surprising. Without proven inning-eaters, West Virginia might need to manage workloads carefully while roles settle. Offensively, the lack of established power narrows margins. If contact quality slips or portal bats take longer to adjust, run production could lag against higher-end arms.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Reliever **Andrew Middleton** carries elite movement data but little sustained collegiate history due to injuries, including a torn ulnar collateral ligament and internal brace surgery. When available, the performance indicators stand out. His 89-92 mph fastball regularly produces more than 20 inches of induced vertical break and generated a 50% whiff rate in 2025. A mid-70s, top-down curveball flashes plus and tunnels effectively off the fastball. Command remains the separator. He has issued 27 walks, and his delivery still wavers.

2026 LINEUP

**Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Matthew Graveline*	Sr.	.282	.371	.513	195	10	53
1B	Tyrus Hall	Jr.	Transfer—Bossier Parish (La.) JC					
2B	Matt Ineich*	So.	.387	.467	.514	142	3	25
3B	Brodie Kresser	G-Sr.	.278	.373	.378	209	3	41
SS	Gavin Kelly	So.	.299	.402	.395	167	2	37
OF	Brock Wills*	Sr.	.351	.450	.545	134	6	22
OF	Sean Smith*	G-Sr.	.352	.458	.599	162	9	36
OF	Armani Guzman	Jr.	.327	.403	.449	107	2	22
DH	Paul Schoenfeld	Sr.	Transfer—Colorado Mesa					

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Chase Meyer	Jr.	3	48.0	3.94	1.46	28.9	17.4
SP	Dawson Montesa	Jr.	Transfer—Adelphi (N.Y.)					
SP	Reese Bassinger	G-Sr.	0	61.2	4.23	1.22	16.0	4.5
RP	Carson Estridge	Sr.	3	48.1	6.14	1.49	21.8	8.2
RP	Andrew Middleton*	Jr.	1	11.2	0.00	1.03	63.0	23.9

22 FLORIDA

Last Season: *39-22 (15-15 SEC); lost at Conway Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 23*
Coach (record at school): *Kevin O'Sullivan (756-371, 19th season)*

Liam Peterson

STRENGTHS

Pure talent has never been Florida's issue under **Kevin O'Sullivan**, and entering his 19th season, the roster again stacks up with the nation's best. On paper, it is another elite group in Gainesville. Context complicates that picture. Florida lost pieces to the draft and navigated a turbulent offseason that extended beyond the roster. Those factors softened preseason expectations, but they did not materially thin the talent pool. The Gators can line up premium tools at nearly every position on the field, and few teams can match their sheer volume of draft-caliber ability. **Liam Peterson** enters the year as the top-ranked pitcher in the 2026 draft, armed with a fastball that can dominate lineups without assistance. Behind him, **Aidan King** profiles as a future ace in his own right, with a chance to contend for similar recognition in 2027. The pairing gives Florida front-end leverage few teams can replicate. That level of upside carries into the lineup. First baseman **Brendan Lawson** is already viewed as a leading candidate to go first overall in 2027, while center fielder **Kyle Jones** enters 2026 with top-three-rounds potential. On the mound, Florida's pitchers feature premium velocity, diverse arsenals and swing-and-miss secondaries. When sequencing and execution align, the staff is capable of overwhelming opponents.

WEAKNESSES

Talent alone has not insulated Florida from turbulence. O'Sullivan will open the season suspended after an outburst during the Conway Regional. That follows a fall in which O'Sullivan took a leave of absence for personal reasons, leaving the team without its head coach. The Gators also lost associate head coach **Chuck Jeroloman** to Tennessee. On the field, inconsistency has lingered.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Liam Peterson's results have yet to fully mirror his arsenal, but the components are unmistakable. His fastball sits in the mid-to-upper 90s with late life that allows it to overpower hitters at the top of the zone. He pairs it with an upper-80s slider featuring two-plane action and a fading changeup in the same velocity band, both of which generated 43% whiff rates. A distinct low-80s breaking ball adds a different shape, and some evaluators believe it can develop into an above-average offering. When command and sequencing align, Peterson possesses the kind of package that can carry a staff.

2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Karson Bowen*	Sr.	.333	.425	.516	159	4	28
1B	Ethan Surowiec*	So.	.375	.524	.750	16	2	8
2B	Cade Kurland	R-Jr.	.316	.490	.605	38	3	15
3B	Brendan Lawson	So.	.317	.417	.522	224	10	61
SS	Sam Miller*	Sr.	.338	.407	.606	216	16	57
OF	Kyle Jones	R-So.	.313	.353	.375	16	0	2
OF	Hayden Yost	Jr.	.259	.380	.392	189	4	38
OF	Blake Cyr	Sr.	.254	.358	.429	205	9	34
DH	Caden McDonald	R-So.	.000	.000	.000	1	0	1

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Liam Peterson	Jr.	15	69.1	4.28	1.43	31.5	10.5
SP	Aidan King	So.	12	73.1	2.58	1.10	26.0	7.6
SP	Russell Sandefer*	Jr.	6	50.2	3.37	1.28	23.6	9.1
RP	Luke McNeillie	Jr.	2	52.1	4.82	1.30	31.2	10.4
RP	Josh Whritenour	R-Fr.	Did not play					

23 SOUTHERN MISS

Last Season: *47-16 (24-6 Sun Belt); lost at Hattiesburg Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 21*
Coach (record at school): *Christian Ostrander (90-36, 3rd season)*

Matthew Russo

STRENGTHS

Southern Miss has become one of the sport's most dependable operations. Regular-season dominance followed by postseason presence is not an exception but an expectation, a standard **Christian Ostrander** has maintained through his first two seasons. Now entering year three, Ostrander again fields a roster built to withstand attrition, returning enough core talent to offset notable draft losses without compromising identity. Southern Miss rarely relies on reinvention. Instead, it leans on internal development, leadership and roster balance to keep its place among the nation's steadiest programs. **Matthew Russo** returns after anchoring the offense last season, joined by **Drey Barrett**, **Davis Gillespie**, **Ben Higdon** and **Joey Urban**, all of whom ranked among the team's statistical leaders in 2025. That group supplies familiarity and lineup stability. The staff supplemented selectively through the portal, adding South Alabama transfer **Kyle Morrison**, whose offensive profile fits cleanly at Pete Taylor Park. Louisiana transfer **Caleb Stelly** missed fall workouts due to a back injury but is expected to be ready by Opening Day. On the mound, depth again separates Southern Miss. Colby Allen shifts into a weekend role after working primarily in relief, sitting 90-93 mph with a sinker complemented by a slider and a developing changeup. Lefthander **Grayden Harris** returns after posting a 3.39 ERA across 58.1 innings and has seen his fastball climb to 94 mph. Fellow lefty Kros Sivley brings nearly 200 career innings and what Ostrander described as "closer-type stuff." The breakout candidate is **McCarty English**. The 6-foot-1 righthander threw only two innings last season while recovering from an elbow stress fracture but returned in the fall sitting 94-95 mph with multiple sharp breaking-ball shapes.

WEAKNESSES

Ace **JB Middleton**, outfielder **Jake Cook** and infielder **Nick Monistere** all departed, removing frontline production from both the rotation and lineup. Southern Miss remained above the hosting line in a strong Sun Belt a year ago, but replacing that caliber of impact is never automatic.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Matthew Russo set the tone in 2025, hitting .290/.407/.563 with 18 home runs. Ostrander has been direct in his assessment, identifying Russo as the offensive compass for the group.

2026 LINEUP **Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Tucker Stockman	R-Jr.	.332	.414	.474	190	6	33
1B	Matthew Russo	Sr.	.290	.407	.563	245	18	57
2B	Kyle Morrison*	Sr.	.294	.399	.521	194	9	44
3B	Drey Barrett	So.	.254	.359	.446	177	9	30
SS	Seth Smith	Jr.	.278	.365	.315	54	0	7
OF	Joey Urban	Sr.	.333	.417	.552	174	9	27
OF	Davis Gillespie	R-Jr.	.242	.365	.464	153	8	30
OF	Ben Higdon	R-Sr.	.323	.398	.513	158	7	22
DH	Caleb Stelly*	Sr.	.302	.414	.490	202	8	33

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Colby Allen	Sr.	2	67.0	3.63	1.04	27.9	6.2
SP	Grayden Harris	So.	15	58.1	3.39	1.51	16.9	9.2
SP	Kros Sivley	Sr.	8	71.2	4.14	1.30	18.7	6.5
RP	Josh Och	Jr.	0	36.1	4.71	1.27	25.5	13.7
RP	Camden Clark	So.	Transfer—Pearl River (Miss.) JC					

EDDIE KELLY (PETERSON), MIKE JANES/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (RUSSO, NORBY), BENJAMIN RUSH/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (CUVET)

24 EAST CAROLINA

Ethan Norby

Last Season: *35-27 (13-14 AAC); lost at Conway Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *NR*
Coach (record at school): *Cliff Godwin (432-214-1, 12th season)*

STRENGTHS

East Carolina's reputation is well earned. Few mid-major programs are as reliable when it comes to reaching the NCAA Tournament and finishing inside the final national rankings, and that consistency has carried across roster cycles. The Pirates enter the season positioned to rebound sharply from a 13-14 showing in American Athletic Conference play in 2025, pairing institutional stability with a roster that looks intentionally reshaped. The core remains intact, but the emphasis this offseason leaned toward refinement. **Ethan Norby** sits near the top of any list of mid-major aces. The lefthander emerged as one of the nation's premier strikeout artists in 2025, finishing eighth nationally in K-BB% among pitchers with at least 60 innings. His effectiveness is rooted in rare feel rather than physical intimidation. Norby is an advanced spin manipulator, and few lefthanders in college baseball demonstrate a more consistent ability to shape pitches. Norby is supported by an experienced everyday core. First baseman **Austin Irby**, third baseman **Colby Wallace**, shortstop **Alex Bouche**, outfielders **Braden Burress** and **Alex Peltier** and catcher **Walker Barron** all return with defined roles. On the mound, **Sean Jenkins** and **Nick Moran** give the staff continuity beyond the front end. East Carolina supplemented through the portal with former West Virginia pitcher **Gavin Van Kempen** and Liberty transfer **Joseph Webb**.

WEAKNESSES

The bullpen is the largest question. The Pirates lost their top reliever, **Ethan Young**, to the draft, removing a stabilizing presence late in games. Among returning pitchers, Norby is the only arm who posted an ERA below 4.50 in 2025 (minimum 15 innings), placing pressure on others to elevate quickly. East Carolina will need multiple players to push beyond prior baselines on both sides of the ball to close the gap between consistency and contention.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Ethan Norby's fastball sits in the low-to-mid 90s and averages13.5 inches of armside run while spinning north of 2,500 rpm in TrackMan games. Nearly 6.5 feet of extension and a low 5-foot-1 release height produce a flat -4.19-degree attack angle that makes the pitch difficult to square. When he locates it well, the run can approach 20 inches, a premium figure for a college lefty. That profile drove a 26.4% whiff rate and a 27.4% chase rate last season.

2026 LINEUP

**Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Walker Barron	Jr.	.250	.335	.313	208	3	31
1B	Austin Irby	So.	.303	.424	.524	208	12	50
2B	Carlos Jacome*	Jr.	.309	.409	.463	162	4	34
3B	Colby Wallace	Jr.	.248	.377	.432	242	10	42
SS	Alex Bouche	Sr.	.251	.323	.417	175	6	29
OF	Braden Burress	So.	.389	.488	.498	211	4	33
OF	Alex Peltier	So.	.211	.299	.293	147	2	12
OF	Davin Whitaker	R-So.	.188	.264	.354	48	2	8
DH	Jack Vogele	Jr.	Transfer—Walters State (Tenn.) JC					

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	Ethan Norby	Jr.	14	90.0	3.80	1.06	32.3	6.0
SP	Sean Jenkins	So.	12	70.1	5.12	1.32	16.8	6.5
SP	Gavin Van Kempen*	Sr.	13	39.2	6.13	1.69	19.9	14.0
RP	Joe Webb*	Sr.	1	46.1	3.50	1.04	26.7	10.5
RP	Nick Moran	Sr.	4	30.2	4.99	1.37	16.4	11.0

25 MIAMI

Daniel Cuvet

Last Season: *35-27 (15-14 ACC); lost at Louisville Super Regional*
Final 2025 Ranking: *No. 16*
Coach (record at school): *JD Arteaga (62-57, 3rd season)*

STRENGTHS

JD Arteaga's first season in Coral Gables ended without an NCAA Tournament berth, an outcome that placed Miami in unfamiliar territory. The follow-up offered little immediate comfort. The Hurricanes sat at 15-14 through 29 games in 2025, drifting well short of expectations before stabilizing late. A 20-13 finish, including the postseason, carried Miami to a super regional and reframed the year. Miami returns several offensive contributors from that run and addressed attrition through the portal. The roster is built to score, and the question is less whether the Hurricanes can hit than whether they'll be able to keep opponents from doing the same. Third baseman **Daniel Cuvet** anchors Miami's offense with one of the louder bats in the ACC. A righthanded hitter with well above-average strength, Cuvet has consistently produced hard contact without fully converting it into game output, leaving room for another step forward. **Michael Torres** supplies value in a different form. His defense in center field is among the best in the league, and his table-setting approach gives Miami pace at the top of the order. **Jake Ogden** brings balance, hitting .336/.402/.500 with nine home runs, 14 doubles and 13 stolen bases without being caught, while **Max Galvin** adds another steady presence after hitting .313 with eight home runs and 18 doubles. The Hurricanes hit their way into a super regional last season, and much of that group remains intact, allowing the offense to carry early expectations again.

WEAKNESSES

Miami leaned heavily on **Griffin Hugus** during its postseason push, riding him for more than 90 innings as a stabilizing force at the front of the rotation. His departure removes both volume and certainty. **AJ Ciscar** returns but now carries a different burden. He must prove he can operate as a true rotation leader rather than a complementary piece. Beyond him, Miami will rely on new faces to shoulder meaningful innings. Transfers **TJ Coats**, **Ryan Bilka**, **Frank Menendez** and **Lyndon Glidewell** all arrive with opportunity in hand.

PLAYER TO KNOW

Daniel Cuvet produced a 93 mph average exit velocity with a 107 mph 90th percentile mark in 2025, placing him among the ACC's most consistent hard-contact hitters. If his swing decisions tighten even marginally as a junior, the effect would raise both the Hurricanes' ceiling and his own draft standing.

2026 LINEUP

**Transfer—stats compiled at previous D-I program*

Pos	Player	Year	AVG	OBP	SLG	AB	HR	RBI
C	Alex Sosa*	Jr.	.291	.401	.534	189	10	40
1B	Brylan West*	G-Sr.	.338	.432	.547	225	12	29
2B	Vance Sheahan*	Jr.	.328	.399	.522	268	12	57
3B	Daniel Cuvet	Jr.	.372	.450	.708	226	18	84
SS	Jake Ogden	Sr.	.336	.402	.500	250	9	36
OF	Max Galvin	R-Sr.	.313	.372	.496	230	8	37
OF	Michael Torres	So.	.231	.350	.276	134	1	14
OF	Fabio Peralta	So.	.238	.316	.302	172	2	13
DH	Derek Williams	G-Sr.	.317	.396	.590	139	9	22

Pos	Pitcher	Year	GS	IP	ERA	WHIP	SO%	BB%
SP	AJ Ciscar	So.	10	66.2	4.46	1.08	22.4	5.5
SP	Tate DeRias	So.	7	43.2	5.77	1.35	15.3	8.2
SP	TJ Coats*	Jr.	3	11.1	7.15	1.94	25.9	22.4
RP	Ryan Bilka*	Sr.	0	62.0	2.18	0.90	23.5	5.3
RP	Frank Menendez*	Jr.	0	7.0	1.29	1.14	38.7	9.7

BUILT TO LAST

In trying for a third title in four years, LSU takes aim at history under coach Jay Johnson

by JACOB RUDNER

On a bus rolling away from Charles Schwab Field in Omaha, the celebration finally quieted enough for clarity to arrive.

Jay Johnson sat near the front, exhaustion settling in after the longest and loudest season of his life, when he realized something essential was already gone. Dylan Crews was sitting behind him, where he always sat. Gavin Dugas, too. And Johnson knew he would never coach either of them again.

That is the paradox at the center of modern college baseball dominance.

You build something powerful enough to win a national championship, and in the same moment, it starts dissolving. The best teams are temporary by design. The best programs are not.

Johnson understood that long before LSU lifted the trophy in 2023, long before it climbed back to the top again in 2025 and long before the Tigers put themselves on the brink of something rarer still. If LSU wins the 2026 national championship, it would become just the second program in college baseball history to capture three titles in four years.

The word dynasty hovers nearby. Johnson refuses to use it.

When he arrived in Baton Rouge ahead of the 2022 season, he did not inherit a blank canvas. LSU already had the weight that comes with being the state's professional baseball team in everything but name. The crowds were there. The expectations were immovable. The tradition was alive. What he inherited instead was imbalance.

There were position players he believed in immediately, a core that could be shaped and sharpened over two seasons. On the mound, there was no such runway.

"On the pitching side of it," Johnson said,

ABOVE: LSU stars Tommy White, Paul Skenes and Dylan Crews (clockwise from left) on the 2023 College Preview cover. LEFT: LSU coach Jay Johnson addresses the 2025 team.

"it was a complete rebuild."

That became the axis of everything that followed.

Johnson had seen the college game shifting before LSU ever called.

West Coast players were bypassing the West Coast entirely, flying over programs like Arizona, where he came from, for the SEC. The gravitational pull was undeniable. What LSU offered him was not just access to elite talent, but the chance to influence that migration by building something so complete that it became the destination.

The moment it became real did not happen under the lights of Alex Box Stadium on opening night. It happened during an intersquad scrimmage. Johnson was turned toward second base, running a baserunning drill, when practice paused and fans began pouring in. When he turned back toward home plate, more than 1,000 people had materialized in the stands.

"This is different," he thought. And then he went back to work.

Johnson's refusal to recalibrate based on noise is not stubbornness. It is structure. His internal bar has never changed with the job title. He calls it being undefeated at preparation.

Recruiting. Development. Scouting. Execution. Win those, and the rest takes care of itself.

That philosophy did not originate in Baton Rouge. It came from a childhood spent watching his father coach track, from early responsibility under Scott Sarver at Point Loma Nazarene, from eight formative years alongside Rich Hill at San Diego and from careful observation of the giants of the profession.

Skip Bertman's program-building at LSU. Augie Garrido's longevity. Mike Gillespie's in-game mastery. Even Nick Saban's relentless standardization of excellence in college football.

Johnson did not copy any of it wholesale. He filtered it.

At LSU, that process produced a clear blueprint. Recruit elite people, not just elite players. Build a staff that can evaluate ruthlessly and develop relentlessly. Say "no" more often than "yes." And above all, recruit pitching that can see its best days ahead.

The results arrived quickly, then all at once.

The 2023 team was powered by generational bookends. Paul Skenes on the mound. Crews in center field. Johnson describes Skenes' season as the best he has ever seen from a college pitcher. Crews, the best position player.

But the team was never just two stars orbiting each other. It was leadership from fifth-year players. Competitive at-bats. Freshmen who grew up in real time. A defense that stopped bleeding runs.

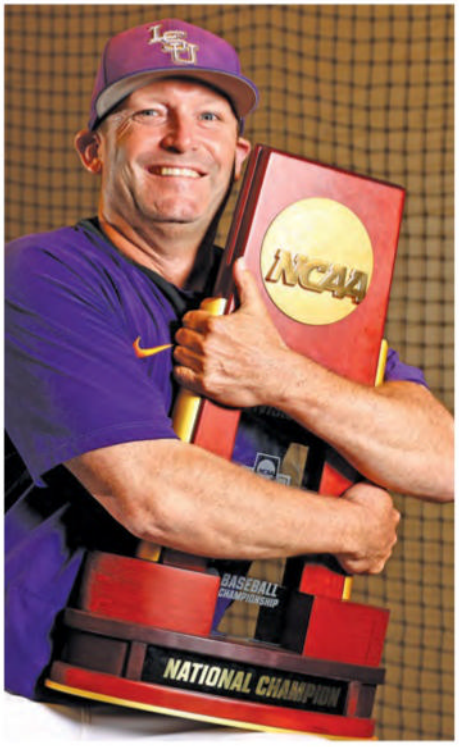
Johnson remembers the exact moment he knew that team had the chops to go all the way: A fall game at Louisiana. Tommy White homered three times. LSU struck out hitters in bulk, played clean defense and left knowing the ingredients were in place.

That team showed up every day. It lost one week all season.

What followed was unavoidable attrition. Thirteen players to professional baseball. Two

ISAAC WASSERMAN/NCAA PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Jay Johnson has built LSU into a juggernaut through the Tigers' excellence in recruiting and mastery of the transfer portal.



irreplaceable stars gone. Johnson did not pretend he could replace that production directly. He replaced it collectively. Three players where one once stood. Development instead of duplication.

The 2024 season tested that belief to its breaking point.

LSU opened SEC play against a gauntlet. Mississippi State. Florida. Arkansas. Vanderbilt. Tennessee. The Tigers started 3-12. The margin between belief and surrender narrowed by the day. Johnson did not flinch.

He asked his players to write down what they needed to succeed, what the staff could do better and what they would commit to regardless of talent. Then he met with every player individually. The team responded by competing. They finished with 43 wins. One dropped fly ball from another super regional.

Johnson calls it one of the proudest seasons of his career.

The lesson was simple and unforgiving. Toughness must be intentional. Togetherness must be taught. When 2025 arrived, those became the program's mantra: tough and together.

That identity found its fulcrum in two pitchers who could not have arrived by more different paths.

Anthony Eyanson was discovered almost by accident, pitching in the Cape Cod League while Johnson was there for another player entirely. He transferred from UC San Diego. Louisiana prep Kade Anderson was recruited aggressively because of who he was as much as what he threw. Anderson's talent was obvious. His character was transformational. Johnson believes the best teams are defined when "their best player is also their best human being."

Together, they formed a front of the rotation Johnson had never experienced. Not a singular superstar, but a pair that could break opponents over a weekend.

The 2025 team announced itself through response. After its first loss, LSU won 17 straight. That team won close games. It came back from 5-1 down in a regional elimination game and refused to lose.

By the time LSU reached the finish line again, the program no longer felt cyclical. It felt structural.

Johnson resists legacy talk. He resists the word dynasty. He resists comparison to himself. He does not deny what has been built, only where credit belongs.

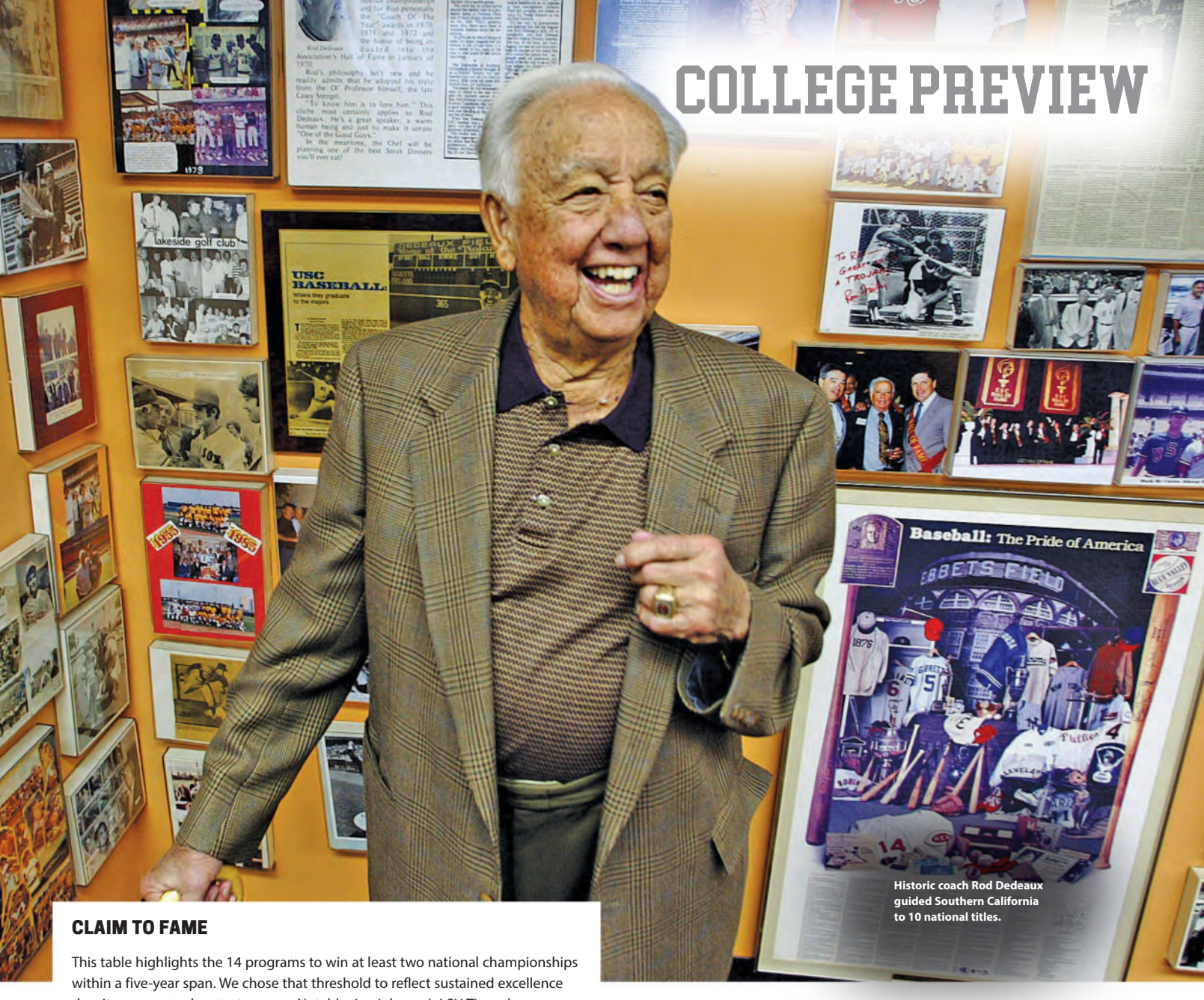
"If you give one inch in this league," he said, "everybody is going to take a mile."

So LSU keeps preparing. Keeps recruiting. Keeps developing. Keeps repeating.

Dynasties are usually identified in hindsight. LSU may be close enough now that it can see the outline of history beginning to form. Johnson would prefer not to look.

That bus ride out of Omaha taught him everything he needs to know. The players change. The work does not.

And that is how dominance lasts. ■



Historic coach Rod Dedeaux guided Southern California to 10 national titles.

CLAIM TO FAME

This table highlights the 14 programs to win at least two national championships within a five-year span. We chose that threshold to reflect sustained excellence despite guaranteed roster turnover. Notably, Jay Johnson's LSU Tigers have a chance to become just the second program in history to win three titles in four years, a feat last achieved by Rod Dedeaux's USC Trojans in the 1970s.

School	Coach	Championships Won Within A Five-Year Period
LSU	Jay Johnson	2023, 2025
South Carolina	Ray Tanner	2010, 2011
Oregon State	Pat Casey	2006, 2007
Texas	Augie Garrido	2002, 2005
Miami	Jim Morris	1999, 2001
LSU	Skip Bertman	1991, 1993, 1996, 1997, 2000
Stanford	Mark Marquess	1987, 1988
Miami	Ron Fraser	1982, 1985
Arizona State	Jim Brock	1977, 1981
Arizona	Jerry Kindall	1976, 1980
Southern California	Rod Dedeaux	1958, 1961, 1963, 1968, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1978
Arizona State	Bobby Winkles	1965, 1967, 1969
Minnesota	Dick Siebert	1956, 1960, 1964
Texas	Bibb Falk	1949, 1950

Here are the college coaches with the most all-time championships:

Name	No.	Years (Team)
Rod Dedeaux	10	1958, 61, 63, 68, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 78 (USC)
Skip Bertman	5	1991, 93, 96, 97, 2000 (LSU)
Augie Garrido	5	1979, 84, 95 (Cal State Fullerton), 2002, 05 (Texas)
Pat Casey	3	2006, 07, 18 (Oregon State)
Jerry Kindall	3	1976, 80, 86 (Arizona)
Dick Siebert	3	1956, 60, 64 (Minnesota)
Bobby Winkles	3	1965, 67, 69 (Arizona State)
Jim Brock	2	1977, 81 (Arizona State)
Tim Corbin	2	2014, 19 (Vanderbilt)
Bibb Falk	2	1949, 50 (Texas)
Ron Fraser	2	1982, 85 (Miami)
Cliff Gustafson	2	1975, 83 (Texas)
Jay Johnson	2	2023, 25 (LSU)
Andy Lopez	2	1992 (Pepperdine), 2012 (Arizona)
Mark Marquess	2	1987, 88 (Stanford)
Jim Morris	2	1999, 2001 (Miami)
Ray Tanner	2	2010, 11 (South Carolina)

TYLER SCHANK/NCAA PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES (JOHNSON WITH TEAM); JAMIE SCHWABERO/NCAA PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES (JOHNSON WITH TROPHY); VINCE COMPAGNONE/LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES (DEDEAUX)

SIX WAYS COACHES WOULD FIX COLLEGE BASEBALL'S COMPETITIVE DIVIDE

by JACOB RUDNER

College baseball has never been an equal-opportunity sport. Geography, weather, facilities, scholarships and institutional commitment have always shaped the landscape. But coaches across the country believe the divide has widened into something more structural—and more permanent. It's no longer a conversation about marginal advantages. It is about whether large segments of the sport are still competing in the same ecosystem.

"You ask the question, 'Who should win the national championship?' " one mid-major coach said. "An SEC team should win the national championship every single year. You're talking about resources, salaries, scholarships, player salaries, revenue share. It's not the same game as the one I'm trying to play. It's pro baseball over there and survival out here."

The imagery coaches use reflects how stark that divide feels from the dugout.

"You've got the majors and you've got Rookie ball, with a bunch of people trying to hang on in Double-A," the coach said. "They're not flying to games. They're taking the bus."

Most acknowledge the imbalance has always existed. What feels new is how few guardrails remain. NIL, the transfer portal and revenue sharing have converged without meaningful regulation, and coaches say the system is now driven almost entirely by money and mobility.

"It's never been a level playing field," one coach said. "But right now, how do you fix that with what's going on? You don't."

THE RESOURCE IMBALANCE ACROSS LEVELS

The financial reality is no longer theoretical. It plays out roster by roster, decision by decision, often in ways that leave smaller programs with no viable counter.

"I paid my top pitcher $100,000 last year just to keep him here," a mid-major coach said. "He could have made $400,000 to go to a power conference school, which was communicating with him through another player. How am I supposed to compete with that?"

The frustration, coaches insist, is not rooted in envy. It's simply a matter of practicality.

"Someone might read this and go, 'Oh, he's just complaining,' " the coach said. "But be realistic with me for a second. How am I supposed to be expected to take this team to Omaha when I'm fighting with my school to put bathrooms in the stadium?"

For some, the conclusion feels unavoidable. Competitive balance, they argue, may require formal separation.

"Eventually, you almost have to separate mid and high majors," one mid-major coach said. "You have to have a scholarship or coaching minimum to be in League A."

REIMAGINING THE BASEBALL CALENDAR

If resources are the underlying fault line, the calendar is where many coaches see the most immediate leverage. Across levels, the same solution keeps resurfacing: Move the season back.

"If our sport is ever to be taken seriously on individual campuses around the country," one high-major coach said, "this would have to happen."

In colder regions around the country, the case to amend the schedule extends beyond weather concerns. Coaches frame it as a matter of visibility and relevance in an increasingly crowded sports calendar.

"Revenue generation gives our sport a voice," another coach said. "It would amplify the voice of college baseball if more schools had a fighting chance to generate dollars. I haven't even mentioned the competitive inequities created by keeping the season as is."

Others arrive at the same conclusion through competitive analysis.

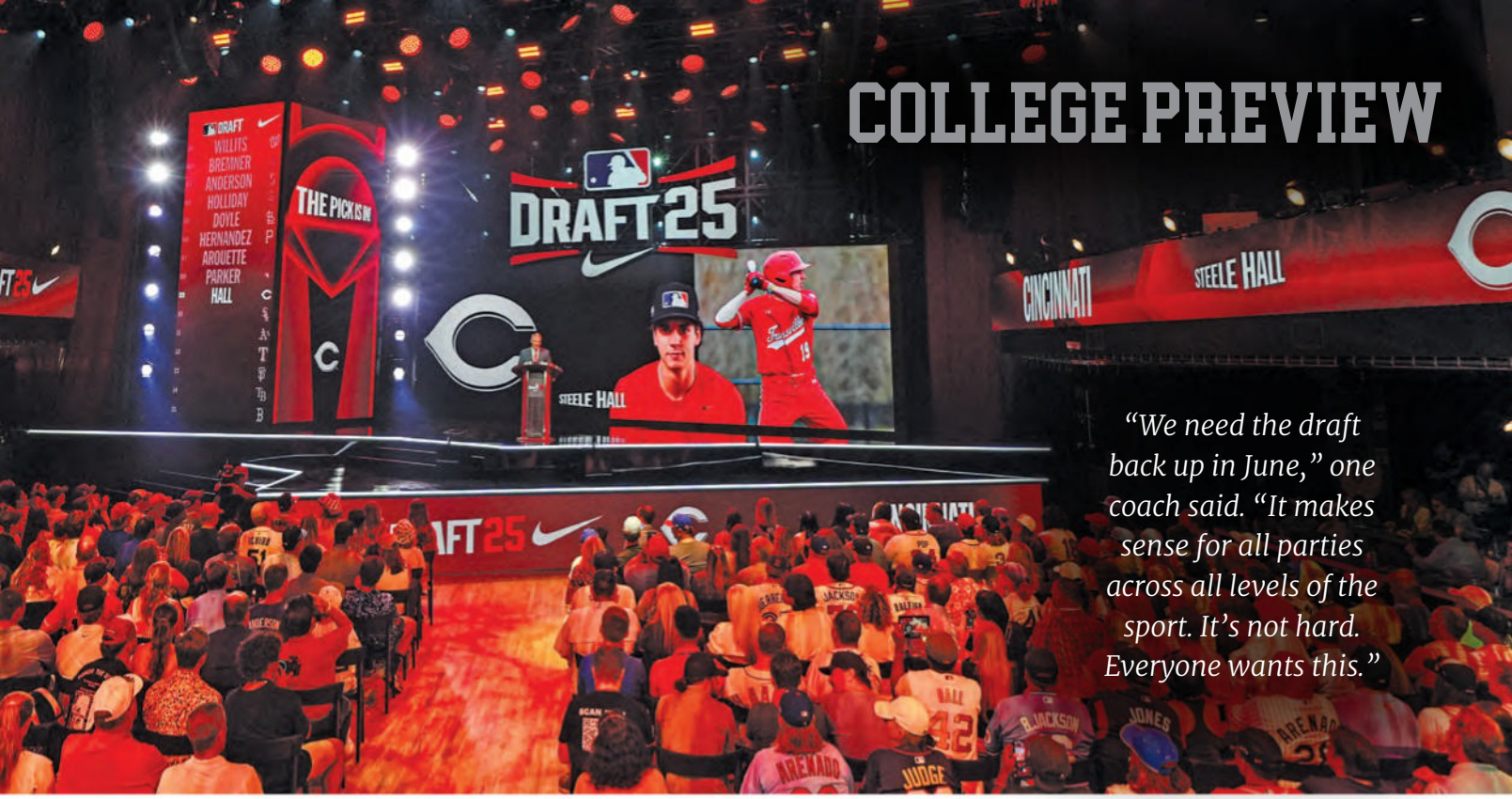
"I would move the season back," one coach said. "I would start March 1 and go into summer. Weather and ramp-up time would be primary factors."

For some, it is no longer a hypothetical.

"I really am beyond convinced on moving the season back," another said. "You need to balance the country from a competitive playing standpoint."

That shift, several believe, would require a postseason rethink, as well. One coach proposed a longer NCAA Tournament scenario featuring 32 host schools to "effectively have two rounds of super-regional-style play." Others envision a full calendar reset that aligns college baseball more closely with professional rhythms.

"My idea is the season runs April through July," one coach said. "The portal window is 14 days from the national championship



"We need the draft back up in June," one coach said. "It makes sense for all parties across all levels of the sport. It's not hard. Everyone wants this."

to Aug. 15. Instructional-only practice in September and October. No practice from November through December. Practice resumes January through March. Like spring training."

TRANSFER PORTAL REFORM OVERDUE

If the baseball calendar is one stress point, the transfer portal is another. Coaches across the sport describe unlimited transfers as the most destabilizing change of all.

"If I could change one thing," one coach said, "it is the unlimited transfer opportunities."

Few argue against player movement entirely. Many argue for boundaries.

"I'm all for a newer version of college baseball which allows players to transfer," another coach said. "But I am adamantly against the multiple transfer."

The most common proposal mirrors old rules with modern flexibility, with one coach proposing a system in which players would get one "free transfer" but would have to sit out a season should they decide to change schools again after that.

Some believe enforcement must eventually mirror the professional side.

"When players break contracts or transfer multiple times, there's no penalty," one coach said. "If a head coach leaves a multi-year contract, there's usually a hefty buyout. Possibly down the road, they have to implement something that fits that narrative."

Tampering, particularly after seasons end, is another shared concern. Coaches say rosters are effectively left unprotected.

"Once the season is complete, programs should have the ability to sign their players for another season," one coach said. "That locks them in and prevents entry into the portal."

Others prescribe narrow negotiation windows to stabilize rosters before summer. One coach suggested implementing a three- to five-day period between the end of the season and the opening of the transfer portal that would allow coaches to negotiate with their players and sign deals for them to return.

AN NIL OVERHAUL

Underlying nearly every proposal is discomfort with how money in the college game currently moves.

"There needs to be public disclosure of NIL and revenue-sharing deals and contracts," one coach said. "There's way too much unregulated, unchecked money flying around right now. Millions and millions of dollars a year are being dished out to players who become free agents annually. It's total chaos."

Some go further, with another coach saying: "I would eliminate NIL entirely and move to a revenue share-only model."

ELIGIBILITY EQUITY

Eligibility and roster rules round out the list of frustrations, particularly when compared to other sports. In college football, for example, FBS coaches recently voted unanimously to adjust the sport's redshirt rule to allow players to participate in as many as nine games while still preserving full-year eligibility. In college baseball, just one official at-bat or pitching appearance burns a player's redshirt.

"Freshmen should be able to play a certain percentage of the season and still preserve a redshirt," one coach said. "Our rules make no sense when football players can play a quarter of the season and keep a year of eligibility."

DRAFT DATE

There is also near-universal agreement on one logistical fix.

"We need the draft back up in June," one coach said. "It makes sense for all parties across all levels of the sport. It's not hard. Everyone wants this."

THE BOTTOM LINE

Taken together, the voices reflect a sport pressing against its own framework. College coaches are not calling for cosmetic change. They are asking for structure, limits and clarity in a system that currently rewards scale and speed above all else.

Whether the answer is reform, separation or recalibration, the message from the dugout is consistent: College baseball cannot keep operating as if nothing has changed. ■

DANIEL SHIREY/MLB PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES

NIL: WHAT ARE THE LARGEST DEALS?

Coaches dish on largest sums of Name, Image, Likeness money they've heard associated with star players

by JACOB RUDNER

The coach did not text back.

Instead, he called, laughing as soon as the line connected.

"I just had too much to say," he said, before even hearing the first question.

Baseball America's survey was intentionally simple. Three questions. Short answers encouraged. The opening prompt was straightforward: What is the largest NIL deal you've heard of for a college baseball player?

"Maybe there's a larger one out there," the coach said, "but the story I've got is too good not to tell."

On the condition of anonymity, the high-major head coach described receiving a call from an agent who informed him the player in question would be entering the transfer portal. The agent named a price and made clear it was not a starting point. Other schools, he said, had already agreed to it.

"He basically asked me to sweeten the deal," the coach said, still laughing.

The offer on the table was substantial. To close the deal, the coach made another call. Knowing his school's football program had existing relationships with a local car dealership, he reached out and asked for help.

The player got a truck.

"And just like that, he's on my team," the coach said.

It was the most vivid story among the 51 responses to Baseball America's inquiry into the largest NIL deals Division I head coaches, assistants and recruiting coordinators say they have heard of since Name, Image, Likeness payments began to reshape college athletics. Other coaches also referenced vehicles as sweeteners. Several cited deals that approached seven figures, in some cases surpassing the salaries of assistants on the same staff.

One theme cut across nearly every response: an understanding that the biggest numbers often live somewhere between fact and rumor, inflated by agents and coaches alike.

"There are rumors of up to a million dollars for one player," one high-major coach said, "but (I have) no idea if it's true or not."

While the extremes were rare, responses clustered heavily around a handful of high six-digit figures, with $500,000 and $750,000 emerging as the most commonly cited.

Largest NIL Deal Heard Of	Responses
$1,100,000	1
$800,000	3
$750,000	11
$700,000	8
$650,000	5
$600,000	7
$500,000	14
$450,000	1
$250,000	1
$200,000	1

Across the responses, certain positions surfaced again and again as the most expensive entries on the market. Pitchers, shortstops and center fielders were singled out by a clear majority of coaches as commanding the largest deals, with premium arms driving the top end.

By most accounts, SEC-bound pitchers were viewed as the most valuable assets of all.

One mid-major head coach told Baseball America that his ace in 2025 was offered $400,000 to leave following the 2024 season to join a national powerhouse. Instead, the pitcher stayed, accepting roughly a quarter of that figure after having a conversation centered on long-term value rather than immediate cash. The coach laid out a path in which strong performance could recoup the difference in the draft. The pitcher followed it, performed and was rewarded.

Another coach, this one from a low-major program, said he estimated the departures from his roster combined to generate over $1 million. He paused before offering any judgment.

"It's easy to understand why some guys would leave," he said, quipping, "I would too if I was making more than my former coach."

The flaws in the system are difficult to ignore. It's a sentiment echoed not just by coaches but by the agents operating within it. One agent who has led NIL negotiations for multiple transfer players told BA that he intentionally embellished numbers during talks in order to secure better deals for his clients. It's worked, he said, almost every time.

Why? No school, the agent explained, had a reliable mechanism for verifying competing offers. Even programs that attempted to keep detailed internal records of NIL deals were operating with incomplete information, making them vulnerable to inflation in an open market with no clearinghouse or meaningful guardrails.

"I have had stories of people getting six figures into the $200,000 to $300,000 range in the past," one mid-major coach said. "However, once you dig into it, a lot of it is fallacy and said player or representative trying to play the game of increasing their value.

"So when those type of numbers are being thrown around, and then said player ends up signing a revenue share/NIL deal for a fraction of that, it makes you wonder what is real and what is trying to play a game."

Even when coaches doubt the numbers, they're forced to plan around them.

Inflated figures reset expectations, shape portal decisions and force staffs to negotiate as if they were real. In practice, several coaches said, negotiations are now built around ranges rather than precise totals, with initial asks almost always higher than the final agreement.

"It's not that you believe all of it," one high-major assistant coach said. "It's more that you just can't ignore it. You'll lose out on the players you want if you do."

For most programs, that reality has concentrated their spending. Coaches said a small subset of premium players—frontline pitchers, middle-of-the-field defenders and proven performers across the roster—absorbs the bulk of available NIL resources, while the rest of the roster operates outside that market entirely.

"Just speaking for (my roster)," one high-major head coach said, "we have three players I guess you could say fall into the top tier for their position and then we have to get more creative with how we do it."

That creativity increasingly extends beyond NIL.

In a more lenient era for roster management, programs are now permitted to fund up to 34 full scholarships, which is enough to cover an entire team. For coaches without access to premium NIL resources, those scholarship slots have become currency.

Rather than competing dollar for dollar, several coaches said they use scholarships to bridge the gap for players they cannot simply pay.

Full or near-full rides, once rare in college baseball, are now deployed strategically, particularly for impact transfers and high-leverage roster pieces.

"It's the only way we can stay in the room," one coach said. "If we can't match the number, we try to match the value."

Taken together, the responses illustrate an NIL market still settling into place.

Despite the headlines, high six-figure deals remain rare. The numbers that surface most often are lower, negotiated quietly and shaped as much by leverage and timing as by performance.

For coaches, that reality has shifted the job. Recruiting is no longer just about player evaluation and fit, but negotiation and risk management. Every number is provisional. Every conversation is strategic.

As the market continues to move, coaches are forced to adjust.

"Excuse my French," a mid-major coach said, "but it's a total s— show." ■

JAY BIGGERSTAFF/GETTY IMAGES

CONFERENCE PREVIEWS

all text by JACOB RUDNER

Drew Burress

ACC

ATLANTIC COAST CONFERENCE PROJECTED STANDINGS (2025 RECORD)

1. Georgia Tech (41-19; 19-11 ACC)
2. North Carolina (46-15; 18-11)
3. Florida State (42-16; 17-10)
4. Virginia (32-18; 16-11)
5. Louisville (42-24; 15-15)
6. Clemson (45-18; 18-12)
7. Miami (35-27; 15-14)
8. Wake Forest (39-22; 16-14)
9. NC State (35-21; 17-11)
10. Duke (41-21; 17-13)
11. Virginia Tech (31-25; 12-18)
12. Stanford (27-25; 11-19)
13. Notre Dame (32-21; 14-16)
14. Boston College (28-29; 11-19)
15. Pittsburgh (28-27; 10-20)
16. California (24-31; 9-21)

TOP 10 DRAFT PROSPECTS FOR 2026

1. AJ Gracia, OF, Virginia
2. Drew Burress, OF, Georgia Tech
3. Eric Becker, SS, Virginia
4. Vahn Lackey, C, Georgia Tech
5. Ryan Lynch, RHP, North Carolina
6. Gavin Gallaher, 3B, North Carolina
7. Jarren Advincula, 2B, Georgia Tech
8. Brett Renfrow, RHP, Virginia Tech
9. Trey Beard, LHP, Florida State
10. Alex Hernandez, 2B/OF, Georgia Tech

TEAM TO BEAT: GEORGIA TECH

Georgia Tech enters the season with one of the more complete rosters in the ACC, led by an offense that is both experienced and draft-oriented. Center fielder Drew Burress sits at the center of it as a legitimate Player of the Year contender. The supporting cast is substantial. Catcher Vahn Lackey, first baseman Kent Schmidt, second baseman Alex Hernandez and outfielder Caleb Daniel all return after strong 2025 campaigns. Several of those bats are likely to factor into the early draft picture as well. Georgia Tech also addressed its pitching needs through the transfer portal while bringing back a handful of experienced arms, namely junior starter Tate McKee and senior innings-eating reliever Mason Patel. That stability on the mound complements an offense built to carry the group over the course of the season.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR: DREW BURRESS, OF, GEORGIA TECH

Burress has rewritten the profile of a middle-of-the-order center fielder, pairing an atypical physical build with production that stacks up against anyone. Across his first two collegiate seasons, he hit .357/.490/.756 with 44 home runs and 38 doubles, while drawing 111 walks against just 79 strikeouts. That blend of strike-zone control and damage has made him the focal point of Georgia Tech's lineup and a constant problem for opposing pitchers. Few hitters in the country combine his level of consistency with true game-changing power. His résumé is one that places him squarely in the national Player of the Year conversation and firmly in very early first-round draft territory.

PITCHER OF THE YEAR: TREY BEARD, LHP, FLORIDA STATE

Beard authored one of the more notable pitching seasons in the country at Florida Atlantic in 2025, posting a 3.14 ERA with 118 strikeouts against 32 walks over 86 innings. He pairs that production with a distinctive look, working from a true over-the-top slot that creates a steep, difficult angle and a 6-foot-9 release height. His low-90s fastball plays above its velocity thanks to natural carry at the top of the zone and is complemented by a mid-70s changeup that fades late as a consistent swing-and-miss pitch. He also mixes a curveball and slider to give hitters multiple shapes. Beard will test his standout arsenal against ACC lineups.

FRESHMAN OF THE YEAR: BROCK KETELSEN, OF/LHP, STANFORD

Ketelsen arrived at Stanford as one of the more compelling two-way freshmen in the country. The 6-foot-4, 205-pound lefthanded hitter impressed during a summer stint in the West Coast League, where he hit .328/.467/.458 with 34 stolen bases while showing advanced strike-zone control with 29 walks against 19 strikeouts. Ketelsen also flashed promise on the mound, posting a 1.04 ERA with 19 strikeouts in 8.2 relief innings, but evaluators project him most strongly as an outfielder.

KEY STORYLINE

● The ACC has made a concerted push to invest in baseball over the last two years. North Carolina and Clemson have expanded their use of technology and player-development resources, Virginia invested aggressively to lure former Duke coach **Chris Pollard** and Florida State made **Link Jarrett** the highest-paid non-SEC coach in the country. The question is what those commitments will translate to competitively. The ACC has yet to reach double-digit NCAA Tournament bids, a bar the SEC has blown past. Whether increased spending can narrow that gap remains one of the league's defining questions. ■

Tommy LaPour

BIG 12

BIG 12 CONFERENCE PROJECTED STANDINGS (2025 RECORD)

1. TCU (39-20; 19-11 Big 12)
2. West Virginia (44-16; 19-9)
3. Arizona (44-21; 18-12)
4. Arizona State (36-24; 18-12)
5. Kansas (43-17; 20-10)
6. Oklahoma State (30-25; 15-12)
7. Cincinnati (33-26; 16-14)
8. Texas Tech (20-33; 13-17)
9. Kansas State (32-26; 17-13)
10. Houston (30-25; 12-17)
11. UCF (29-26; 9-21)
12. Baylor (33-22; 13-17)
13. BYU (28-27; 10-20)
14. Utah (21-29; 8-22)

TOP 10 DRAFT PROSPECTS FOR 2026

1. Sawyer Strosnider, OF, TCU
2. Tommy LaPour, RHP, TCU
3. Chase Brunson, OF, TCU
4. Cole Carlon, LHP, Arizona State
5. Owen Kramkowski, RHP, Arizona
6. Andrew Williamson, OF, UCF
7. Brady Ballinger, 1B, Kansas
8. Nathan Taylor, RHP, Cincinnati
9. Logan Hughes, OF, Texas Tech
10. Jack Natili, C, Cincinnati

TEAM TO BEAT: TCU

TCU enters the season with one of the most established rosters in the country after bringing back the bulk of its 2025 contributors. That continuity gives the Horned Frogs a high baseline, particularly with elite draft talents Sawyer Strosnider, Tommy LaPour and Chase Brunson at the front of the group. Strosnider returns after a breakout freshman season, while LaPour leads a rotation built with returnees. Offensively, nearly every projected starter is a returner, limiting the need for internal reshuffling. First baseman Rob Liddington, a transfer from Incarnate Word, and DH Kyuss Gargett, who arrives from Kentucky, are the primary additions expected to play regular roles. Their presence adds depth and complementary skills to an otherwise stable lineup.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR: SAWYER STROSNIDER, OF, TCU

Strosnider announced himself immediately in 2025, producing one of the most complete freshman campaigns in the country en route to Big 12 freshman of the year honors. He hit .350/.420/.650 with 13 doubles, 11 home runs and a nation-best 10 triples. That offensive profile is complemented by athleticism and defensive value, with plus speed and a strong arm giving him impact beyond the batter's box. A second-team All-American last spring, the draft-eligible sophomore could settle into center field full time and remain a central figure in determining how far TCU advances.

PITCHER OF THE YEAR: TOMMY LAPOUR, RHP, TCU

LaPour stands out in a draft class heavy on velocity because he sustains his stuff rather than simply flashing it. After transferring from Wichita State, he quickly established himself as TCU's most dependable starter, logging 90.1 innings with a 3.09 ERA and 88 strikeouts. He gives the Horned Frogs a consistent front-of-the-rotation starter. Built around a strong lower-half foundation, LaPour's delivery allows his fastball to stay in the mid-to-upper 90s well into outings, with occasional triple-digit finishes and effectiveness at the top of the zone. He complements it with a low-to-mid-80s slider that misses bats at a high rate and a firm changeup that shows late fade.

FRESHMAN OF THE YEAR: JACK LAFFLAM, RHP, ARIZONA

Lafflam is an unconventional arm with an outstanding feel for spin and an arsenal that features multiple average-or-better offerings. The 6-foot-6, 180-pound righthander works across his body from a higher three-quarters slot with a loose arm, producing a low-90s fastball with high spin and frequent cutting life. Lafflam tops out at 97 mph but typically settles lower as starts progress. A mid-80s sweeping slider stands out as his best secondary, while a mid-70s curveball and firm upper-80s changeup give him four looks.

KEY STORYLINE

● Several Big 12 coaches enter 2026 facing varying degrees of pressure to validate the direction of their programs. Arizona State's **Willie Bloomquist** broke a program-worst NCAA Tournament drought in 2025 but now needs to convert momentum and a strong offseason into measurable competitive gains. Oklahoma State's **Josh Holliday** hasn't advanced out of a regional in his last five tries. Texas Tech's **Tim Tadlock** and Houston's **Todd Whitting** both face seasons where simply reaching the postseason feels essential to reinforcing stability. In a landscape defined by accelerated timelines and rising investment, prolonged idling is rarely afforded patience. ■

DAVID J. GRIFFIN/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES (BURRESS), BRIAN WESTERHOLT/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (LAPOUR)

Logan Reddemann

BIG TEN

BIG TEN CONFERENCE PROJECTED STANDINGS (2025 RECORD)

1. UCLA (48-18; 22-8 Big Ten)
2. Oregon (42-16; 22-8)
3. Indiana (32-24; 16-14)
4. Nebraska (33-29; 15-15)
5. USC (37-23; 18-12)
6. Iowa (33-22-1; 21-9)
7. Michigan (33-23; 16-14)
8. Washington (29-28; 17-13)
9. Illinois (30-24; 14-16)
10. Penn State (33-23; 15-15)
11. Rutgers (29-28; 15-15)
12. Northwestern (25-27; 13-17)
13. Michigan State (28-27; 13-17)
14. Maryland (27-29; 12-18)
15. Minnesota (24-28; 10-20)
16. Purdue (31-23; 11-19)
17. Ohio State (13-37; 5-25)

TOP 10 DRAFT PROSPECTS FOR 2026

1. Roch Cholowsky, SS, UCLA
2. Maddox Molony, SS, Oregon
3. Mulivai Levu, 1B, UCLA
4. Logan Reddemann, RHP, UCLA
5. Mason Edwards, LHP, USC
6. Roman Martin, 3B, UCLA
7. Will Gasparino, OF, UCLA
8. Cal Scolari, RHP, Oregon
9. Brayden Martin, 3B, Maryland
10. Keegan O'Hearn, LHP, Michigan

TEAM TO BEAT: UCLA

UCLA enters the season positioned as the national title favorite after committing to a high school-heavy recruiting approach that required patience in 2023 and 2024 but paid off with a return to the College World Series in 2025. That sophomore-driven roster, led by shortstop Roch Cholowsky, proved capable of handling the demands of a deep postseason run and largely remains intact for 2026. Cholowsky returns after a historic sophomore season is surrounded by a veteran core that brings back production across nearly every position, including first baseman Mulivai Levu and a pitching staff headlined by Wylan Moss and Michael Barnett. UCLA supplemented selectively through the transfer portal and beat the draft to add freshman righthander Angel Cervantes and infielder Dominic Cadiz.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR: ROCH CHOLOWSKY, SS, UCLA

Cholowsky's 2025 season already placed him in rare company—he became just the sixth non-draft-eligible player to earn College Player of the Year honors. Now the unanimous top prospect in the 2026 draft, he enters his junior season with the chance to push into unprecedented territory. No player has ever repeated as POY, yet Cholowsky's track record makes the possibility more than theoretical. He hit .353/.480/.710 a year ago with 23 home runs, 19 doubles and 45 walks to just 30 strikeouts. Given that history, matching his previous production would likely be enough to challenge a barrier no player has crossed.

PITCHER OF THE YEAR: LOGAN REDDEMANN, RHP, UCLA

UCLA didn't need much out of the transfer portal last offseason, which allowed it to use a chunk of its resources to acquire a frontline pitcher. It settled on Reddemann, beating several SEC teams, which had the former San Diego starter at the top of their transfer boards. A 6-foot-2, 185-pound righty, Reddemann sits in the low-to-mid 90s with a fastball that has solid carry at the top of the zone and drew a 25% chase rate. His signature weapon is a comfortably plus low-to-mid 80s changeup with fade and tumble. Reddemann finished his sophomore season at USD with a 2.29 ERA and 53 strikeouts to 12 walks over 55 innings.

FRESHMAN OF THE YEAR: BRAYDEN JAKSA, C, OREGON

BA's No. 76 prospect in the 2025 draft class, Jaksa arrived in college as one of the more advanced high school bats in his class. The 6-foot-5 catcher added roughly 20 pounds during his first collegiate fall and showed the kind of game power that separates him from typical first-year players, along with a solid feel for the defensive demands of the position. That combination positions Jaksa to factor into the lineup early in Eugene.

KEY STORYLINE

● The Big Ten has long been defined by football and, to a lesser extent, basketball. Baseball has lagged well behind. The conference has not produced a College World Series champion since Ohio State in 1964 and, prior to UCLA's run to Omaha last season, had sent just two teams to super regionals since 2010. While the league has produced early-round draft picks in recent years, no program has consistently assembled the depth required to contend on a national stage. UCLA's arrival has already shifted the conference's profile. With the Bruins entering 2026 as the clear favorites to win it all, the Big Ten finds itself with a rare and legitimate chance to challenge a national championship drought that has stretched more than six decades. ■

Ace Reese

SEC

SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE PROJECTED STANDINGS (2025 RECORD)

1. LSU (53-15; 19-11 SEC)
2. Mississippi State (36-23; 15-15)
3. Auburn (41-20; 17-13)
4. Georgia (43-17; 18-12)
5. Texas (44-14; 22-8)
6. Arkansas (50-15; 20-10)
7. Tennessee (46-19; 16-14)
8. Ole Miss (43-21; 16-14)
9. Vanderbilt (43-18; 19-11)
10. Oklahoma (38-22; 14-16)
11. Florida (39-22; 15-15)
12. Texas A&M (30-26; 11-19)
13. Alabama (41-18; 16-14)
14. Kentucky (31-26; 13-17)
15. South Carolina (28-29; 6-24)
16. Missouri (16-39; 3-27)

TOP 10 DRAFT PROSPECTS FOR 2026

1. Justin Lebron, SS, Alabama
2. Derek Curiel, OF, LSU
3. Liam Peterson, RHP, Florida
4. Tyler Bell, SS, Kentucky
5. Ace Reese, 3B, Mississippi State
6. Chris Hacopian, 3B Texas A&M
7. Caden Sorrell, OF, Texas A&M
8. Chris Rembert, 2B, Auburn
9. Joey Volchko, RHP, Georgia
10. Gavin Grahovac, 3B, Texas A&M

TEAM TO BEAT: LSU

LSU's success under head coach Jay Johnson has made the Tigers the team to beat in the both the SEC and the nation. They've won two of the last three national titles and rank No. 2 in the preseason Top 25. LSU lost a deep chunk of its 2025 talent via the draft, including the strikeout-mongering duo of Kade Anderson and Anthony Eyanson, but reloaded aggressively via the portal and high school recruiting. LSU layers that talent atop an already strong foundation highlighted by righty Casan Evans, outfielder Derek Curiel and shortstop Steven Milam. Betting against the juggernaut Johnson built would be a fool's errand. As such, the Tigers open 2026 as favorites to win their league and major contenders to win it all.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR: ACE REESE, 3B, MISSISSIPPI STATE

Reese was at the center of offseason transfer portal rumors after the Bulldogs hired longtime Virginia head coach Brian O'Connor to lead the program. Had he entered, the slugging corner infielder would have instantly become the most sought-after player on the market. Instead, Reese stayed put in Starkville, remaining the face of the franchise and positioning himself at the center of Mississippi State's renewed national title hopes. Reese was a hard-hit machine in 2025, posting a 91 mph average exit velocity while demonstrating a knack for pulling the ball in the air. He makes an impressive amount of contact for an aggressive hitter and finished his sophomore season hitting .352/.422/.718 with 21 home runs and 18 doubles.

PITCHER OF THE YEAR: LIAM PETERSON, RHP, FLORIDA

Two years of refinement have led Peterson into his draft season as the top-ranked starting pitcher in the country, a distinction he is aware of and does not take lightly. The 6-foot-5 righty is armed with a fastball that tickles triple digits and explodes out of his uniquely high 6-foot-7 release point. His slider, changeup and curveball all flash plus, and he added a two-seam variant to challenge righthanders, an addition inspired by former Gator and Braves 2023 first-round righthander Hurston Waldrep. If Peterson can live around the strike zone in 2026, he will be a tough act to top at the national level, not just in the SEC.

FRESHMAN OF THE YEAR: JACK BAUER, LHP, MISSISSIPPI STATE

Eyebrows reached the hairline as the early rounds of the 2025 draft came and went without mention of flamethrowing prep lefty Jack Bauer, who became one of just five prep players ever to throw a verified 102 mph pitch. Bauer opted for college and enrolled at Mississippi State, where his historic heat immediately made an impression as he dominated hitters throughout his first collegiate fall and positioned himself to contribute out of the gate.

ONE KEY STORYLINE

● LSU's 2025 national title trimmed the SEC's deficit to one in the all-time race for winningest baseball conference. The league now trails the currently inactive Pacific-12 Conference (18) with 17 national titles. The SEC's tally includes each of the last six dating back to 2019, an NCAA record for consecutive championships produced by one conference. Though UCLA enters the year as the favorite to hoist the 2026 trophy, the SEC has the best odds of producing a seventh straight winner as it will almost certainly claim the most NCAA Tournament bids. Last year, the league broke its own record with 13 bids, the same number Baseball America projects for it in 2026. ■

RIC TAPIA/GETTY IMAGES (REDDEMANN), EDDIE KELLY (REESE)

7 'OUTSIDE VIEWS' THAT BUILD SMARTER DYNASTY TEAMS

by MATT EDDY

Today, dynasty league fantasy baseball managers have no shortage of resources available to help them assess prospects' tools, peak projections and rankings. Numerous sites and social media accounts display Statcast-inspired batted-ball data and pitchers' Stuff+ scores.

That's why I take a much broader view with my dynasty strategy ideas. Well, that's not the only reason. Taking more of an "outside view" is one of the only things that differentiates me in dynasty leagues.

I'm not the best pure evaluator, and I'm certainly no projections wonk. What I do have is perspective, having worked at Baseball America for 25 years.

Here are the "outside views" that I apply most frequently in dynasty leagues.

1. SHORTSTOPS ADAPT

To play shortstop at a high level requires quick, precise, athletic movements. It requires anticipation. It requires the adaptability to make many different types of plays running in all directions, throwing from all angles.

These skills—athleticism, anticipation, adaptability—tend to translate to the batter's box, if not immediately, then over time. A shortstop might not hit much as a young major leaguer, but often he can adapt.

It doesn't hurt that a shortstop's secondary tools—typically some combination of run, field and throw—help keep him on the field to gain batting reps and develop his hitting.

Players such as Jeremy Peña, Geraldo Perdomo and Dansby Swanson are examples of shortstops whose offensive production hovered near average for multiple seasons before the pieces fit. Eventually, the whole was equal to the sum of the parts.

Adaptability applies not only to swing mechanics and hitting approaches. It also applies to defense. A player who can handle shortstop typically throws well enough to play third base and has the range and footwork to play second base. Many shortstops run well enough to play outfield.

2. LEFTHANDERS KNOW THE ROUTINE

From a young age, lefthanded pitchers face lineups with seven, eight or nine righthanded batters. Their stuff has to play against opposite-side hitters, which helps authenticate their performance on their way up the ladder.

For many lefthanders, this steady diet of righthanded hitters helps them adjust to MLB competition more quickly. They are well-practiced at locating changeups to their arm side and four-seamers, cutters and sliders to their glove side.

For those lefties who struggle to retire off-hand hitters, the high-power, low-control ones may quickly find themselves in the bullpen, while the low-power,

Think of the Baseball America dynasty rankings as your guide to building a successful roster in a startup dynasty league draft.

Success can be measured in present terms or future aspirations. Some managers will draft a team to win now. Others will take aim at year two. Still others will hoard prospects in an effort to build a roster full of players who will grow together toward their peak seasons.

We rank players in order of their projected future value, with an emphasis on their value in a three-year window, in this case from 2026 to 2028. In some cases, value can be interpreted as *trade* value. Many prospects are young enough and promising enough to be exchanged for win-now MLB veterans.

Underpinning the BA dynasty rankings are MLB player projections built by Dylan White and his proprietary RoboScout model, which factors, among other things, weighted statistics, age curves and Statcast data, such as batted-ball metrics and pitch attributes.

Dylan is an accomplished redraft player who, along with co-manager Brian Slack, won the high-stakes NFBC Main Event competition in 2024.

Geoff Pontes lends his prospect expertise to help line up minor league players and integrate them into a ranking full of established major leaguers. Geoff has been playing in dynasty leagues for nearly 20 years and has built dynasty prospects rankings for a decade. He is a veteran of several industry leagues, including LABR and Tout Wars.

high-control southpaw often has a long career as a depth starter.

Additionally, there is an observed "novelty" factor for lefthanders, which seems to be confirmed by their MLB success in recent seasons, both among veteran and rookie southpaws.

As a group, major league lefthanders in 2025 posted their best results of the 30-team era. Their 142.2 fWAR, 1.27 WHIP and 14.5 K-BB% are the best marks of the sample, while their 22.8% strikeout rate is the best in a 162-game season.

3. THE OUTFIELD CAN BE PLATOON PURGATORY

I prefer to tread lightly with young lefthanded-hitting outfielders. They face by far the biggest platoon risk in MLB. The outfield is open to virtually all player types—batters of both hands, throwers of both hands, power-oriented players, speed-oriented players and even a few glove-oriented players.

That means that a young lefthanded-hitting outfielder has to be completely well-rounded to play every day. Also, it's much easier for an MLB team to run a platoon or two in the outfield than it is at other positions. This puts lefthanded hitters at elevated playing-time risk.

Unless they hit like Roman Anthony or field like Pete Crow-Armstrong, a young lefthanded-hitting outfielder risks falling into platoon purgatory.

4. RIGHTHANDED THROWERS OFFER TRUE VERSATILITY

MLB teams are becoming increasingly obsessed with versatility. It allows them to move players around the diamond to field their best lineups, while also affording rest days for regulars.

As a result, lefthanded-throwing position players are on the wane. They can play only outfield or first base, and increasingly they are only playing outfield. A lot of first basemen are migrating to the position from other spots. Examples include Vladimir Guerrero Jr., Michael Busch and Bryce Harper, who began his career as a catcher. By definition, that makes them righthanded throwers.

The lefthanded-throwing position player today has a tougher time securing a bench role, because extra roster spots tend to go to the most versatile players.

And true positional versatility can only be achieved by a righthanded thrower, which has led to a rise in the infield/outfield utility player, as typified by Brendan Donovan, Mauricio Dubon and Zach McKinstry.

5. PITCHERS & CATCHERS PEAK LATER

Seek opportunistic additions or trades for pitchers or catchers in their mid 20s, especially if they have demonstrated they can handle the physical and mental grind of a full MLB season.

It's not unusual for MLB pitchers and catchers to struggle for their first few seasons as they acclimate to the heavy burden of preparing for and executing a game plan against MLB hitters.

Evaluating young baseball players is a tricky business. The physical, mental and emotional roadblocks to development are myriad, especially for pitchers and catchers.

6. MIND THE MARGINS

Hitting for average and for impact are the most important attributes for an MLB position player. But the reality is that the vast majority of potential MLB hitters are separated by thin margins when it comes to their hit tool and power. Most will fall in the general vicinity of average.

For even more extensive coverage, scan the QR code to visit dynasty HQ at BaseballAmerica.com

That's why it can be beneficial to find players who have advantages on the margins, such as fielding prowess, speed, athleticism or positive reviews for makeup and work ethic. Those minor separators can make a major difference for a player working his way into the regular lineup.

7. TEAMS' HISTORY WITH TEENAGERS

Throughout history, MLB teams have demonstrated repeatedly that they are skilled at identifying future major league hitters when they are teenagers.

These players may change positions between the time they are 17 and the time they are 25, but many of the top high school and international prospects achieve MLB stardom.

With the notable exception of Aaron Judge, the best hitters of the 2020s signed as teenagers. Juan Soto, Yordan Alvarez, Freddie Freeman, Mike Trout, Ronald Acuña Jr. Bryce Harper, Corey Seager and Vladimir Guerrero Jr. occupy eight of the top 10 spots for wRC+ since 2020. The ninth non-Judge entry is Shohei Ohtani, who was drafted and signed as a teenager in Japan.

The same trend does not exist for pitchers.

Most of the lowest FIPs by starting pitchers in the 2020s are from college draftees, such as Paul Skenes, Jacob deGrom, Garrett Crochet, Chris Sale, Corbin Burnes and Tarik Skubal. However, a slew of pitchers signed as teenagers—most notably Logan Webb, Zack Wheeler, Cole Ragans, Cristopher Sanchez and Max Fried—have begun to cut into the advantage.

While teen pitchers may one day realize MLB stardom, the road is long and treacherous. I prefer not to wait five or more seasons for a young pitcher to mature and build workload. ■

An asterisk denotes a player who is prospect-eligible on Opening Day 2026

Click the QR code to read full fantasy profiles of all 40 catchers at BaseballAmerica.com

TOP 40

1. Cal Raleigh, SEA, Age 29 **Overall: #35**

Heading into 2025, Raleigh had a career .218 batting average but 32 home runs per 600 plate appearances. By hitting .247 with 60 home runs and an AL MVP runner-up nod, the Mariners backstop proved he was more than an empty power source who will harm your batting average. Raleigh finished as the third-highest ranked player in 2025. Because he has averaged 660 PAs the past two years, expect 40 home runs or so with counting stats that far surpass any other catcher. The flip side: Raleigh's heavy workload might eventually take its toll on his production.

2. Samuel Basallo, BAL, Age 21*	#48
3. William Contreras, MIL, Age 28	#65
4. Ben Rice (1B), NYY, Age 27	#84
5. Shea Langeliers, ATH, Age 28	#87
6. Agustin Ramirez, MIA, Age 24	#88
7. Drake Baldwin, ATL, Age 25	#92
8. Rainiel Rodriguez, STL, Age 19*	#123
9. Will Smith, LAD, Age 31	#142
10. Ivan Herrera, STL, Age 26	#146
11. Francisco Alvarez, NYM, Age 24	#160
12. Alejandro Kirk, TOR, Age 27	#208
13. Adley Rutschman, BAL, Age 28	#211
14. Carter Jensen, KC, Age 22*	#212
15. Gabriel Moreno, ARI, Age 26	#213
16. Hunter Goodman, COL, Age 26	#214
17. Kyle Teel, CWS, Age 24	#215
18. Austin Wells, NYY, Age 26	#235
19. Yainer Diaz, HOU, Age 27	#236
20. Josue Briceño, DET, Age 22*	#266
21. Dalton Rushing, LAD, Age 25	#269
22. Logan O'Hoppe, LAA, Age 26	#298
23. Salvador Perez (1B), KC, Age 36	#304
24. Dillon Dingler, DET, Age 27	#329
25. Edgar Quero, CWS, Age 23	#331
26. Alfredo Duno, CIN, Age 20*	#350
27. Bo Naylor, CLE, Age 26	#399
28 J.T. Realmuto, FA, Age 35	#403
29. Ryan Jeffers, MIN, Age 29	#442
30. Carlos Narvaez, BOS, Age 27	#443
31. Sean Murphy, ATL, Age 31	#477
32. Tyler Stephenson, CIN, Age 29	#488
33. Patrick Bailey, SF, Age 27	#494
34. Keibert Ruiz, WSH, Age 27	#497
35. Eduardo Tait, MIN, Age 19*	NR
36. Cooper Ingle, CLE, Age 24*	NR
37. Joe Mack, MIA, Age 23*	NR
38. Ike Irish, BAL, Age 22*	NR
39. Harry Ford, WSH, Age 23*	NR
40. Marco Dinges, MIL, Age 22*	NR

Alvarez

Moreno

Goodman

TARGETS

ADLEY RUTSCHMAN, ORIOLES (#13)

After producing a 134 wRC+ in 2022 and 126 in 2023, Rutschman's next two seasons were disappointing. He dealt with a hand injury in 2024 and two oblique strains in 2025. Now, we're left to parse through whether that's natural wear and tear for a catcher, or a series of freak injuries for a player whose skills should not be declining during his peak years.

Rutschman's exit velocity data returned to his career norms in 2025 after dipping the previous season. His hard-hit and barrel rates were identical to his 2023 season. And many of his plate skills actually improved, i.e. 22.5% O-swing, 91.9% zone-contact rate and a 5.4% swinging-strike rate. Rutschman also recorded his hardest-hit ball in 2025, a 111.3 mph event. Despite the struggles, Rutschman is a worthwhile gamble in fantasy this year. Buy the dip and reap the rewards of the bounceback. (Geoff)

FRANCISCO ALVAREZ, METS (#11)

While public perception of Alvarez is likely at its nadir, he is a dynasty target for a second consecutive year because his peak projections still hover around a 130 wRC+ with 30 homers per 600 plate appearances. Alvarez has battled a series of hand and wrist ailments over the last two seasons, including UCL injuries to both of his thumbs. He had surgery to repair his right thumb following the 2025 season. Assuming his recent chronic injuries are more bad luck than a long-term concern, he's a definite target. (Dylan)

SLEEPERS

TYLER STEPHENSON, REDS (#32)

Stephenson has lurked on the periphery of fantasy relevance for five seasons but never put together a top-five season for a catcher, though he finished inside the top 10 in both 2021 and 2024. The 29-year-old showed tangible changes in 2025 worth buying into this season.

Stephenson traded some contact for power, posting a career-best 14.4% barrel rate over 88 games. That translated to the highest average exit velocity of his career (90.5 mph) and the highest hard-hit rate of his career at 49.2%. He also walked more in 2025 than in any previous season. With his pending free agency, improving power-hitting profile and friendly home park in Cincinnati, Stephenson looks like a potential value in 2026 as he posts his first top-five catcher season. (Geoff)

GABRIEL MORENO, D-BACKS (#15)

Moreno often goes overlooked because both redraft and dynasty crowds pooh-pooh his barely double-digit home run power. To me, he's a no-doubt fantasy asset.

Moreno enters his age-26 season as an excellent defender, meaning he'll earn full-time plate appearances, and he's an above-average hitter who handles all pitch types well. Even with below-average power, a catcher who doesn't sink batting average or OBP goes a long way in fantasy. It's much easier to improve your team's power during the season than it is to up your batting average or OBP. (Dylan)

FADES

HUNTER GOODMAN, ROCKIES (#16)

The 2025 season was a true breakout for Goodman, who hit .278/.323/.520 with 31 home runs and 91 RBIs. He finished as the No. 2 catcher in 5×5 roto. So why is he 15th in our catcher rankings? Because we're skeptical he can repeat, even in the BABIP haven that is Coors Field.

Goodman ran a 39.7% O-swing and a 16.3% swinging-strike rate. History says it's highly unlikely he sustains both his batting average and home run output with that swing profile. His closest statistical comp is 2021 Salvador Perez, who hit 48 homers with a .273 average. Perez remained valuable in subsequent roto seasons, but he was an OBP liability and less useful in points formats. Other hitters who paired Goodman-like chase and whiff rates include Javy Baez, Nick Castellanos, Ryan Mountcastle and Adolis Garcia. (Geoff)

EDGAR QUERO, WHITE SOX (#25)

Quero and Kyle Teel entered 2025 primed to battle for the title of the White Sox's catcher of the future. Unfortunately for Quero, Teel grabbed the reins. Producing the worst framing metrics in MLB didn't help Quero's cause. Additionally, his ability to control the running game was in the bottom 15th percentile.

Quero has excellent bat-to-ball skills and does not chase. The issue is his bat speed, which sits in the bottom fifth percentile. Unless something changes, Quero might never hit more than 10-12 homers. (Dylan)

KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES (RALEIGH), DUSTIN SATLOFF/GETTY IMAGES (ALVAREZ), ELSA/GETTY IMAGES (MORENO), MIKE CARLSON/MLB PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES (GOODMAN)

1B

An asterisk denotes a player who is prospect-eligible on Opening Day 2026

TOP 40

1. Nick Kurtz, ATH, Age 23 **Overall: #15**

The fourth overall pick in 2024, Kurtz carved up the minor leagues in his pro debut. We had an inkling that he would be productive in his rookie season—but we had no idea he'd be this good. After totaling 5 fWAR and 36 home runs in 489 plate appearances in 2025, Kurtz already has one of highest peak home run projections among many public models. Expect his .290 batting average to regress a bit in 2026, because his xBA was "only" .255, but the A's slugger demolished nearly all pitch types en route to a 170 wRC+ in his age-22 season. The sky is the limit.

2. Vladimir Guerrero Jr., TOR, Age 27	#16
3. Bryce Harper, PHI, Age 33	#36
4. Pete Alonso, BAL, Age 30	#40
5. Rafael Devers, SF, Age 29	#42
6. Matt Olson, ATL, Age 32	#51
7. Freddie Freeman, LAD, Age 36	#64
8. Tyler Soderstrom (OF), ATH, Age 24	#81
9. Josh Naylor, SEA, Age 29	#82
10. Vinnie Pasquantino, KC, Age 28	#83
11. Ben Rice (C), NYY, Age 27	#84
12. Michael Busch, CHC, Age 28	#103
13. Bryce Eldridge, SF, Age 22*	#106
14. Sal Stewart, CIN, Age 22*	#108
15. Kyle Manzardo, CLE, Age 25	#143
16. Yandy Diaz, TB, Age 34	#159
17. Jonathan Aranda, TB, Age 28	#191
18. Spencer Torkelson, DET, Age 26	#200
19. Alec Burleson (OF), STL, Age 27	#223
20. Willson Contreras, BOS, Age 34	#224
21. Triston Casas, BOS, Age 26	#226
22. Colt Keith (2B/3B), DET, Age 24	#256
23. Coby Mayo, BAL, Age 24	#259
24. Salvador Perez (C), KC, Age 36	#304
25. Nolan Schanuel, LAA, Age 24	#312
26. Ryan Clifford, NYM, Age 23*	#313
27. Andrew Vaughn, MIL, Age 28	#315
28. Ralphy Velazquez, CLE, Age 21*	#323
29. Christian Walker, HOU, Age 35	#326
30. Luis Arraez, FA, Age 29	#327
31. Lenyn Sosa (3B), CWS, Age 26	#353
32. Miguel Vargas (3B), CWS, Age 26	#360
33. Spencer Steer, CIN, Age 28	#363
34. Spencer Horwitz, PIT, Age 28	#386
35. Ryan O'Hearn (OF), PIT, Age 32	#396
36. Jake Burger, TEX, Age 30	#411
37. Paul Goldschmidt, FA, Age 38	#469
38. Curtis Mead (3B), CWS, Age 25	#474
39. Rhys Hoskins, FA, Age 33	#482
40. Ryan Mountcastle, BAL, Age 29	#492

Click the QR code to read full fantasy profiles of all 40 first basemen at BaseballAmerica.com

Pasquantino

Burleson

Freeman

TARGETS

VINNIE PASQUANTINO, ROYALS (#10)

Pasquantino established himself as one of the top first basemen in baseball in 2025. It was his first time playing more than 150 games, and the results followed. He hit a career-high 32 home runs with 113 RBIs.

Under the hood, Pasquantino saw a significant jump in his barrel rate, climbing from 7.1% in 2024 to 10.8%. Since he's reached the majors, he's shown a good balance of plus bat-to-ball skills and plus power. In 2025, it finally came together. Entering his age-28 season, Pasquantino is squarely in his prime. I'm buying into a repeat of his 2025 season. (Geoff)

SAL STEWART, REDS (#14)

For three straight years, Stewart's minor league contact rate has been plus at 78% to 80%. His 90th percentile exit velocity has risen consistently from 103 mph as a 19-year-old to 107 last year. There were questions as to where Stewart would play on defense, but it seems like his likely home will be first base.

We liken Stewart to Pasquantino as someone who should hit .270 to .280 with on-base percentages that should reach .350 at peak while putting up 20-plus home runs yearly. His homer totals are likely to be even higher playing at Great American Ball Park.

In redraft leagues for 2026, Stewart was being taken in the 16th round—the same as Spencer Steer and 10 rounds after Pasquantino. He's underpriced in redraft, and once that's discovered, we will realize he is underpriced in dynasty, too. (Dylan)

SLEEPERS

RYAN CLIFFORD, METS (#26)

With the departure of Pete Alonso to Baltimore in free agency, the projected incumbent at first base is Mark Vientos. But with just 17 career major league games at first base, it's possible that experiment doesn't work out. Fortunately, the Mets have Clifford, who should be more than an adequate fill-in defensively, waiting in the wings.

From an offensive standpoint, RoboScout sees the 22-year-old Clifford producing, at peak, a .345 OBP with 35 home runs. Those are essentially Bryce Eldridge-type projections without the hype. Public projections have him slightly lower, which to me makes him a sleeper. (Geoff)

ALEC BURLESON, CARDINALS (#19)

In terms of real-life value, Burleson had a better season in 2025 than he did in 2024. However, in fantasy, value often deviates from real life, and Burleson wasn't as valuable in 2025 for managers due to a dip in his totals of RBIs and runs.

Despite this drop in production, Burleson showed several under-the-hood signs of a coming breakout. For example, he set his career high in barrel rate last season at 9.4%, a product of jumps in exit velocity and steeper angles.

Additionally, all of his plate-skill metrics trended up, as he lowered his chase rate and swinging-strike rate. With multi-position eligibility, Burleson is poised to potentially provide his managers value at plenty of spots across the diamond. (Dylan)

FADES

JOSH NAYLOR, MARINERS (#9)

Few players in MLB are as fun as Naylor. His exuberant style of play was on full display in the Mariners' run to Game 7 of the ALCS.

After Naylor signed a five-year contract to stay in Seattle, we have a clearer view of what his future lineup and home park look like. Having split his 2025 season between Arizona and Seattle, Naylor is coming off the best season of his career. While he saw his home run total dip from 31 to 20 and his RBIs from 108 to 92, he managed to be more valuable due to a surprise 30-steal season.

With just 25 career stolen bases entering 2025, it's hard to imagine Naylor steals 25-plus bases again. It's certainly possible, but due to the lack of track record as a basestealer, I'm fading Naylor. (Geoff)

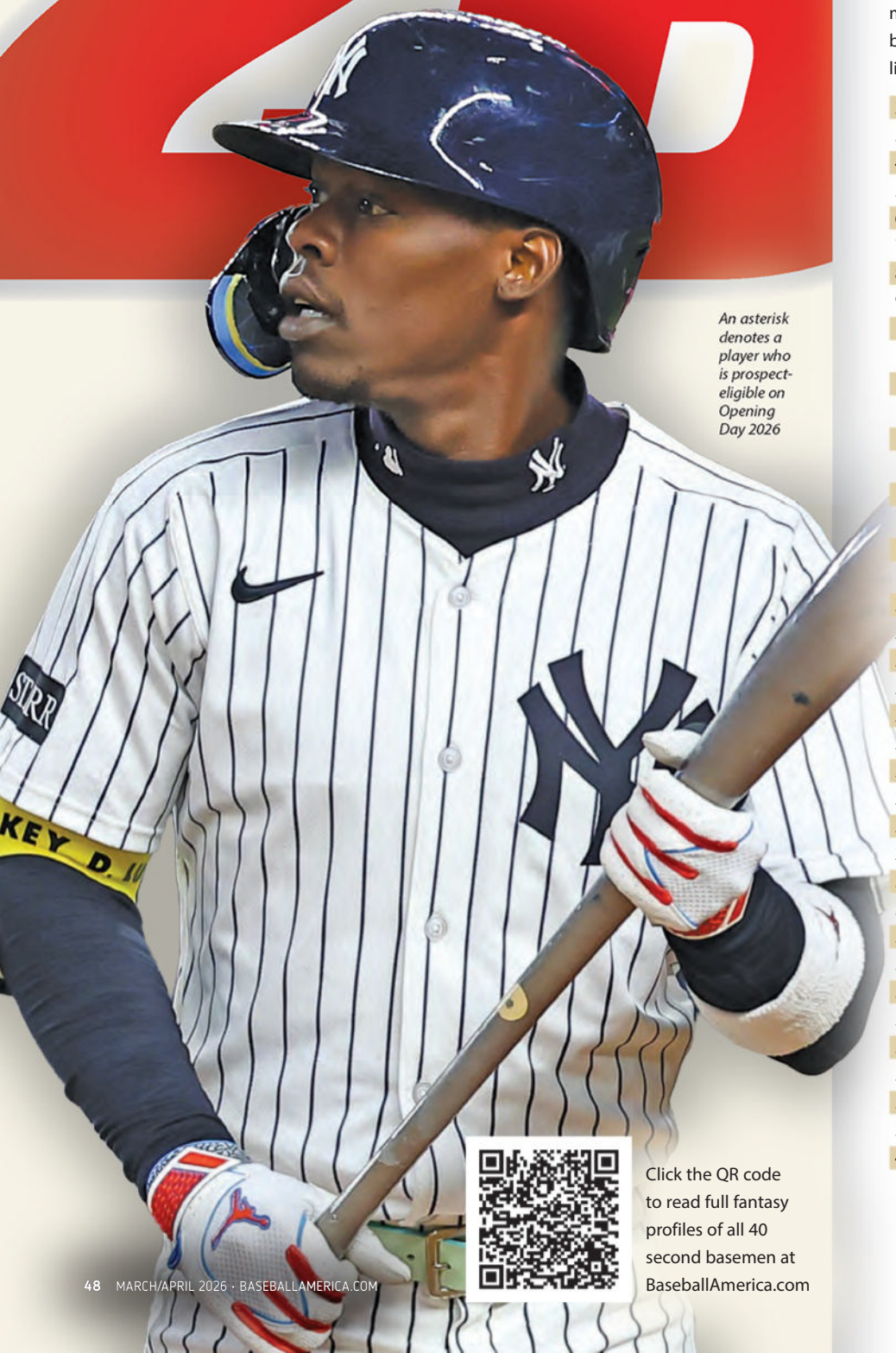
FREDDIE FREEMAN, DODGERS (#7)

This is less an indictment on Freeman's value as it is commentary on his perceived value. Hitting in the middle of a stacked Dodgers lineup, Freeman's only true "flaw" at the position is that he is in his mid 30s.

Figuring out when to trade aging fantasy contributors—see: Paul Goldschmidt and Mike Trout—is the hardest thing to time up correctly when playing dynasty. If you pull the trigger too early, you pay a huge opportunity cost. If you wait too long, your return might be meager. This might be a good time to test the waters in moving Freeman, as he is currently riding the World Series wave and likely high on radars. (Dylan)

SCOTT MARSHALL/GETTY IMAGES (KURTZ), (PASQUANTINO), BRANDON SLOTER/GETTY IMAGES (BURLESON), PATRICK MCDERMOTT/GETTY IMAGES (FREEMAN)

2B



An asterisk denotes a player who is prospect-eligible on Opening Day 2026

TOP 40

1. Jazz Chisholm Jr. (3B), NYY, Age 28
Overall: #19

In his first full season with the Yankees, Chisholm hit 31 home runs, stole 31 bases and posted 4.4 fWAR to show he had no trouble playing in the media capital of the world. That he's still in his 20s and has dual eligibility in most formats makes his fantasy profile even more appealing. Chisholm's only flaw is a not-so-great batting average. Expect his 2026 to pretty much look like his 2025 campaign.

2. Kevin McGonigle, DET, Age 22	#31
3. Ketel Marte, ARI, Age 32	#41
4. Jackson Holliday, BAL, Age 22	#69
5. Luke Keaschall, MIN, Age 23	#76
6. Brice Turang, MIL, Age 26	#77
7. Jose Altuve (OF), HOU, Age 36	#89
8. Ozzie Albies, ATL, Age 29	#129
9. Travis Bazzana, CLE, Age 24*	#167
10. Gleyber Torres, DET, Age 29	#186
11. Brett Baty (3B), NYM, Age 26	#188
12. Nico Hoerner, CHC, Age 29	#201
13. Kristian Campbell, BOS, Age 24	#207
14. Brandon Lowe, PIT, Age 31	#209
15. Ceddanne Rafaela (OF), BOS, Age 25	#216
16. Xavier Edwards (SS), MIA, Age 26	#225
17. Otto Lopez (SS), MIA, Age 27	#232
18. Bryson Stott, PHI, Age 28	#233
19. Caleb Durbin (3B), MIL, Age 26	#254
20. Matt McLain, CIN, Age 26	#255
21. Colt Keith (1B/3B), DET, Age 24	#256
22. Luis Garcia Jr., WSH, Age 26	#257
23. Michael Arroyo, SEA, Age 22*	#301
24. Jorge Polanco, NYM, Age 32	#306
25. Brendan Donovan (OF), STL, Age 29	#332
26. Marcus Semien, NYM, Age 35	#343
27. Lenyn Sosa (1B), CWS, Age 26	#353
28. Tommy Edman (OF), LAD, Age 31	#391
29. Chase Meidroth (SS), CWS, Age 25	#392
30. Jose Caballero (SS/3B/OF), NYY, Age 29	#398
31. Andres Gimenez, TOR, Age 27	#400
32. Cole Young, SEA, Age 22	#405
33. Demetrio Crisantes, ARI, Age 22*	#433
34. Tyler Freeman (OF), COL, Age 27	#435
35. Aroon Escobar, PHI, Age 21*	#446
36. Devin Fitz-Gerald, TEX, Age 21*	#465
37. Nolan Gorman (3B), STL, Age 26	#480
38. Jake Cronenworth, SD, Age 32	#485
39. Jeff McNeil (OF), ATH, Age 34	#486
40. Jonathan India (OF), KC, Age 29	#489

Click the QR code to read full fantasy profiles of all 40 second basemen at BaseballAmerica.com

Keaschall

Lopez

Torres

TARGETS

LUKE KEASCHALL, TWINS (#5)

The Twins are rebuilding, and it's possible that Keaschall is now the best hitter in their lineup. While health has eluded him the last few seasons, Keaschall on a per-game basis looks outstanding. In a 49-game MLB sample, he hit .302/.382/.445 with four home runs and 14 stolen bases. Steamer projects him for 10 homers and 20 steals in 2026, but I'll take the over on both numbers. Possibly as soon as 2026, I believe Keaschall can produce 15-18 home runs and 25-30 stolen bases while hitting for average and getting on base. (Geoff)

BRETT BATY, METS (#11)

The departure of Pete Alonso as a free agent and projected shift to first base for Mark Vientos opens up the hot corner for Baty, so his days at second base could be numbered.

Still, targeting Baty holds up based on his hot finish to the 2025 season. In 190 plate appearances after July 18, Baty hit .291/.353/.477 with nine home runs and five stolen bases. To put that into context: Over that same time frame, albeit in 260 plate appearances, Ketel Marte hit .276/.355/.461 with nine home runs and two stolen bases.

Circling back, I think Baty might be even more of a sneaky target if the Mets do sign a high-profile first baseman. At face value, that makes his playing time potentially murky, but it might be a buying opportunity if the Baty owner feels incentivized to move him. (Dylan)

SLEEPERS

CHASE MEIDROTH, WHITE SOX (#29)

Meidroth is the type of hitter who is broadly overlooked by the fantasy community because of his relatively empty batting average. But with his potential for 20 stolen bases and solid defense, Meidroth is more on the Steven Kwan side of the spectrum than the Nolan Schanuel side.

RoboScout sees Meidroth as a .280 hitter with the potential for 12 homers and 15 steals and strong on-base skills. That isn't all too different from Caleb Durbin, who is being taken five rounds earlier in redraft and ranked more than 100 spots higher in dynasty. With his middle-infield defense keeping him in a lineup, Meidroth's floor is high enough to suggest the gap between the two shouldn't be so large. (Dylan)

OTTO LOPEZ, MARLINS (#17)

An afterthought three years ago, Lopez has blossomed into a great value in Miami. He produced a 15-home run, 15-stolen base season in 2025, a performance backed by a career-best barrel rate of 7.1% and a 38.3% hard-hit rate. Additionally, he saw a jump in flyball rate in 2025—it went from 25.5% in 2024 to a career-high 34.1%. It wasn't just a matter of adding power. Lopez saw improvements to all of his skill metrics, including O-swing and swinging-strike rates, which both dropped, and contact rates that rose. Lopez got a little more passive inside the strike zone, but that's likely a good trade-off for more and better quality of contact. (Geoff)

FADES

KRISTIAN CAMPBELL, RED SOX (#13)

What can I say? Sometimes, things fall apart. The 2024 version of Campbell all but disappeared by May 1. It was as if his fairy godmother had run out of magic and his bat speed gains turned back into a pumpkin. Campbell still produced OK numbers at Triple-A, but the bat speed and impact were all but gone. It's possible a fully healthy offseason helps Campbell recapture the spark that made him the 2024 Minor League Player of the Year. I'm just not betting on it after he bottomed out in 2025. (Geoff)

GLEYBER TORRES, TIGERS (#10)

After accepting his qualifying offer, Torres will be playing at least the first part of 2026 in Detroit. His 38-home run campaign in his age-22 season is far in the rearview mirror. The 29-year-old Torres has been in the bottom 25th percentile for bat speed and sprint speed—two primary underlying skills in fantasy baseball—for two straight years now. And with Kevin McGonigle knocking on the door, Torres' immediate future is murky. That uncertainty, along with his declining skills, makes it worth exploring trading Torres if you roster him.

Torres is still a 20ish-home run bat with a solid batting average, so he's still productive. But with his defense being in the bottom third of the league, there's a reasonable chance the Tigers or some other team moves him to first base in the not-too-distant future, knocking down his fantasy value even further. (Dylan)

RICH GRASS/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES (CHISHOLM JR.), ADAM BETTCHER/GETTY IMAGES (KEASCHALL), CARMEN MANDATO/GETTY IMAGES (LOPEZ), RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES (TORRES)

3B

TOP 40

1. Junior Caminero, TB, Age 22

Overall: #11

In his first full MLB season, Caminero hit 45 home runs, knocked in 110 runs and amassed 5 fWAR. He spent the first half of the season as a 21-year-old. If this is what the third baseman is doing now—and with the prospect pedigree and underlying data to support it—expect a decade of top fantasy performance from the young Dominican slugger. Take note of the Rays' move from minor league Steinbrenner Field back to Tropicana Field in 2026.

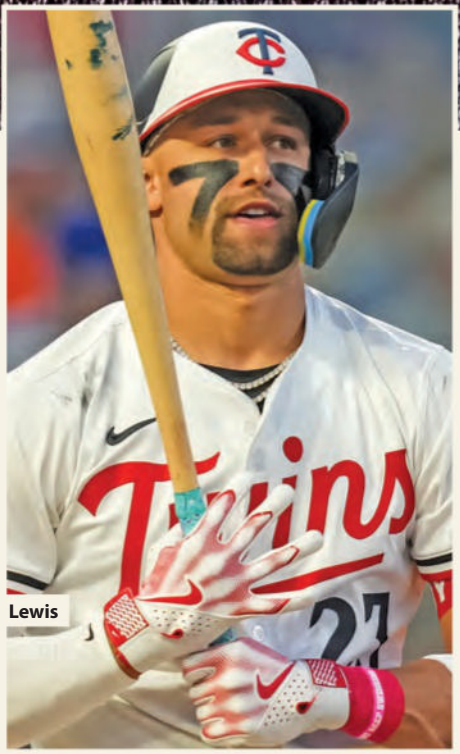
2. Jose Ramirez, CLE, Age 33	#17
3. Jazz Chisholm Jr. (2B), NYY, Age 28	#19
4. Manny Machado, SD, Age 33	#34
5. Jordan Westburg, BAL, Age 27	#67
6. Austin Riley, ATL, Age 29	#71
7. Matt Shaw, CHC, Age 24	#107
8. Maikel Garcia, KC, Age 26	#130
9. Alex Bregman, CHC, Age 32	#132
10. Royce Lewis, MIN, Age 27	#135
11. Isaac Paredes, HOU, Age 30	#139
12. Addison Barger (OF), TOR, Age 26	#149
13. Mark Vientos, NYM, Age 26	#174
14. Eugenio Suarez, FA, Age 34	#175
15. Noelvi Marte (OF), CIN, Age 24	#184
16. Matt Chapman, SF, Age 33	#185
17. Brett Baty (2B), NYM, Age 26	#188
18. Jordan Lawlar (SS), ARI, Age 23	#189
19. Alec Bohm, PHI, Age 29	#239
20. Marcelo Mayer, BOS, Age 23	#244
21. Carlos Correa (SS), HOU, Age 31	#252
22. Caleb Durbin, MIL, Age 26	#254
23. Munetaka Murakami, CWS, Age 26	#280
24. Kazuma Okamoto, TOR, Age 30	#445
25. Max Muncy, LAD, Age 35	#309
26. Jacob Reimer, NYM, Age 22*	#317
27. Josh Jung, TEX, Age 28	#325
28. Miguel Vargas (1B), CWS, Age 26	#360
29. Brady House, WSH, Age 23	#388
30. Tommy Edman (2B/OF), LAD, Age 31	#391
31. Jose Caballero (2B/SS/OF), NYY, Age 29	#398
32. Ronny Mauricio (2B), NYM, Age 25	#401
33. Josh Smith (SS), TEX, Age 28	#409
34. Brock Wilken, MIL, Age 24*	#415
35. Zach McKinstry (SS/OF), DET, Age 31	#424
36. Curtis Mead (1B), CWS, Age 25	#474
37. Nolan Gorman (2B), STL, Age 26	#480
38. Ke'Bryan Hayes, CIN, Age 29	#495
39. Blaze Alexander, ARI, Age 27	#496
40. Luis Rengifo (2B), FA, Age 29	NR

An asterisk denotes a player who is prospect-eligible on Opening Day 2026

Click the QR code to read full fantasy profiles of all 40 third basemen at BaseballAmerica.com

Riley

Okamoto


Lewis

TARGETS

AUSTIN RILEY, BRAVES (#6)

After three consecutive seasons of 30-plus home runs and 90-plus RBIs, Riley has struggled to stay on the field over the last two years. Limited to 110 games in 2024 and 102 in 2025, Riley has perhaps seen injuries take a toll. What is more certain is that his walk and strikeout rates have trended in the wrong direction. On the other hand, Riley has underperformed his expected stats each of the last two seasons while showing no decline in contact quality. I'm willing to take the discount and bet on Riley returning to form. He's still in his 20s and had a three-year run as one of the best power hitters in the game. (Geoff)

MAIKEL GARCIA, ROYALS (#8)

Garcia is one of the few third base options with speed. That and his incredibly high floor make him a golden opportunity. Garcia's 90th percentile bat-to-ball skills and elite defense contributed to a ridiculous 6 fWAR season in 2025. When a hitter has what looks like a career year, his value doesn't rise as much as it should, because fantasy managers want to see it for more than one year.

In that scenario, if you can find the hitter who has a better-than-average chance of repeating his career year, you will have fantasy gold. With Garcia's high floor and long leash, it is entirely conceivable that he will hit .275 with a .340 OBP, 12-15 homers and 25 stolen bases not just in 2026, but for the next five years (Dylan)

SLEEPERS

KAZUMA OKAMOTO, BLUE JAYS (#24)

Okamoto is a six-time NPB all-star who receives scouting grades of 50 hit and 55 power. That translates to a .250 batting average with 20-25 home runs in MLB. As an above-average defender at the hot corner, Okamoto should have a high floor for at least three years. I'm betting that his bat-to-ball skills will translate better to the major leagues and be closer to .280 than .250, with an accompanying OBP around .340. If Okamoto is capable of that type of production, then he compares with recent-era Alex Bregman. If a top 20% outcome is to produce on par with the 11th-ranked third baseman in dynasty—while likely playing on a competitive team—comes to pass, then Okamoto is the definition of a sleeper. [Dylan]

BROCK WILKEN, BREWERS (#34)

It's been a pair of trying seasons for Wilken, who dealt with a scary injury in 2024 after being hit in the face. In 2025, Wilken was enjoying the best season of his career prior to an injury sustained while celebrating Double-A Biloxi's first-half Southern League championship.

Wilken is healthy heading into 2026 and could be on a trajectory to see time with the Brewers. He has plus game power and projects as a 30-home run bat. He could ascend to the majors by midsummer and produce big power numbers down the stretch without sacrificing on-base skills. (Geoff)

FADES

ROYCE LEWIS, 3B, TWINS (#10)

Heading into his age-27 season, Lewis still hasn't played more than 127 games in a season—and that came all the way back in 2019. Lewis has simply never been healthy enough to be counted on to play 140 games in a season. Despite nice counting stats in 2025, Lewis had the worst offensive season of his career, hitting .237/.283/.388 for a line 15% worse than a league-average hitter. The No. 1 overall draft pick in 2017, Lewis' time to prove he's not a bust is beginning to run out. (Geoff)

EUGENIO SUAREZ, FREE AGENT (#14)

A big factor for choosing Suarez here is simply the inevitable regression from 49 home runs in his age-33 season. On top of that, there are some underlying factors suggesting regression might be more severe than projections are expecting. All of Suarez's expected stats were far below his surface production, potentially accelerating the "natural" mean regression that is forthcoming.

Additionally, Suarez's defense cratered in 2025, especially his range. This might make his stay at the hot corner shorter than it looked like it would be even one year ago. Finally, Suarez overcomes a high strikeout rate with excellent hard-hit and barrel rates, but having this much swing-and-miss in his mid 30s is a recipe for disaster. I Suarez starts off strong in 2026, I would try to trade him despite his incredible short-term power potential. (Dylan)

CHRIS BERNACCHI/DIAMOND IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES (CAMINERO), KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES (RILEY), COLE BURSTON/GETTY IMAGES (OKAMOTO), BRACE HEMMELGARN/MINNESOTA TWINS/GETTY IMAGES (LEWIS)

TOP 40

1. Bobby Witt Jr., KC, Age 26 **Overall: #3**

After a three-year period in which he averaged 27 home runs and 37 stolen bases, Witt is a proven five-tool shortstop with the top sprint speed and most defensive range in baseball. He essentially hit his median outcome in 2025 with 23 home runs and 38 stolen bases while batting .295. He has room to do better than that. He has the upside to go 30-30 with a .300 batting average and .350 OBP for the next three years. Witt is top-shelf material and perhaps the most talented player this side of Shohei Ohtani.

2. Elly De La Cruz, CIN, Age 24	#6
3. Gunnar Henderson, BAL, Age 25	#7
4. Konnor Griffin, PIT, Age 20*	#21
5. Zach Neto, LAA, Age 25	#27
6. Francisco Lindor, NYM, Age 32	#30
7. CJ Abrams, WSH, Age 25	#37
8. JJ Wetherholt, STL, Age 24*	#39
9. Trea Turner, PHI, Age 33	#43
10. Mookie Betts, LAD, Age 33	#44
11. Corey Seager, TEX, Age 32	#50
12. Geraldo Perdomo, ARI, Age 26	#68
13. Jeremy Peña, HOU, Age 28	#70
14. Jesús Made, MIL, Age 19*	#73
15. Aidan Miller, PHI, Age 22*	#86
16. Sebastian Walcott, TEX, Age 20*	#95
17. Leo De Vries, ATH, Age 20*	#96
18. Bryce Rainer, DET, Age 21*	#97
19. Bo Bichette, FA, Age 28	#102
20. Willy Adames, SF, Age 30	#131
21. Jacob Wilson, ATH, Age 24	#137
22. Colt Emerson, SEA, Age 21*	#140
23. Caleb Bonemer, CWS, Age 21*	#144
24. Luis Peña, MIL, Age 19*	#151
25. Anthony Volpe, NYY, Age 25	#172
26. Jordan Lawlar (3B), ARI, Age 23	#189
27. Masyn Winn, STL, Age 24	#210
28. Xavier Edwards (2B), MIA, Age 26	#225
29. Otto Lopez (2B), MIA, Age 27	#232
30. Trevor Story, BOS, Age 33	#234
31. Ezequiel Tovar, COL, Age 24	#237
32. Xander Bogaerts, SD, Age 33	#242
33. Dansby Swanson, CHC, Age 32	#243
34. Carlos Correa (3B), HOU, Age 31	#252
35. Josuar Gonzalez, SF, Age 19*	#268
36. JoJo Parker, TOR, Age 20*	#271
37. Colson Montgomery, CWS, Age 24	#296
38. Dax Kilby, NYY, Age 19*	#300
39. Kaelen Culpepper, MIN, Age 23*	#305
40. Steele Hall, CIN, Age 19*	#310

An asterisk denotes a player who is prospect-eligible on Opening Day 2026

Click the QR code to read full fantasy profiles of our top 60 shortstops at BaseballAmerica.com

Wetherholt

Emerson

Turner

TARGETS

JJ WETHERHOLT, CARDINALS (#8)

While Konnor Griffin would have been an easy choice, telling you to target Konnor Griffin likely does you little good. If the Griffin owner in your league is looking to trade him, find another league. So my pivot is to Wetherholt. While he's likely to be heavily valued in dynasty leagues, his 2026 impact might be a little underrated. The 2024 seventh overall draft pick will likely play the majority of his games this season in the majors. His plus hit tool brings immediate impact in multiple categories, and with enough MLB time and some luck, 20 home runs isn't out of the picture. Wetherholt looks like a fantasy star for years to come, so buy now before your league catches up in March. (Geoff)

JACOB WILSON, ATHLETICS (#21)

While I have much less hesitation than my league mates in rostering players like Luis Arraez and Steven Kwan, it is a reality that the perceived value of these profiles makes it difficult to trade them away. The argument nearly became moot when Wilson was busy breaking out in the first half of 2025 with a .329 batting average (not too surprising) and nine home runs (surprising). He tailed off with only four homers in the second half, but I think that was due to the undiagnosed forearm fracture he was playing through. In other words, I think projections are baking in his second half of 2025 as being "true talent" while I believe he was unfairly being impacted by an injury. (Dylan)

SLEEPERS

EZEQUIEL TOVAR, ROCKIES (#31)

It was just two seasons ago when a 22-year-old Tovar hit 26 home runs with a .269 batting average while having 99th percentile range at shortstop. Throw in the fact that Tovar plays at Coors Field, and he should be good for a .280 batting average with 20-plus home runs for the next five years or so. In batting average leagues, that's excellent. But after a 2025 season in which Tovar was plagued by hip and oblique injuries, fantasy managers are drafting him as if he has the possibility of being demoted in a worst-case scenario. In OBP leagues, Tovar is not as great of an asset, but I think he is definitely being underestimated for 2026. I'm betting that Tovar will be ranked higher in 2027 than he is now. (Dylan)

COLT EMERSON, MARINERS (#22)

I understand that Emerson is not a sleeper in a majority of leagues, but I believe his potential 2026 impact is being undersold. He made a tweak to his swing in the first half of last season, and the results that followed were impressive. So much so that he climbed to Triple-A on the wave of his second-half accomplishments.

Emerson has a plus hit tool, which provides a high floor for batting average and on-base percentage. With his swing improvements in the second half, he also started to finally tap into his 25-plus home run power more consistently. Buy now and laugh all the way to the bank in nine months. (Geoff)

FADES

TREA TURNER, PHILLIES (#9)

One of the all-time great fantasy shortstops, Turner is coming off one of the best years of his career in 2025. He hit .304/.355/.457 with 15 home runs and 36 stolen bases. Over the last two seasons, he has really outperformed his expected numbers across the board. Outside of that, there's not a ton of negative in Turner's profile. But as Turner enters his age-33 season, it's likely his speed and overall production will begin a downward trend in 2026 that won't reverse in the coming years. While Turner remains a viable fantasy star, the window to move on is wide open for daring managers willing to cash in now. (Geoff)

MOOKIE BETTS, DODGERS (#10)

Fades are not so much "avoids" as they are notice of potential opportunity to get a reasonable value if one were to trade a player. Fades also signify that if you were given the opportunity to acquire them, you might be better off passing despite the appearance of reasonable value. In Betts' case, it is more of a resignation that the 30 home runs of 2022 and 2023 are likely a relic of the past. You pretty much know what you're going to get here: a shortstop who will hit 20 home runs, steal 12 bases, hit above .265 and score many runs by hitting in the Dodgers' lineup. But because of the name value, managers would have to pay a premium for those stats. Betts is a late-third-round pick in redraft, and that status likely will continue sinking. (Dylan)

KEITH GILLETT/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES (WITT JR.), BRIAN WESTERHOLT/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (WETHERHOLT), MICHAEL ZAGARIS/ATHLETICS/GETTY IMAGES (EMERSON), CARMEN MANDATO/GETTY IMAGES (TURNER)

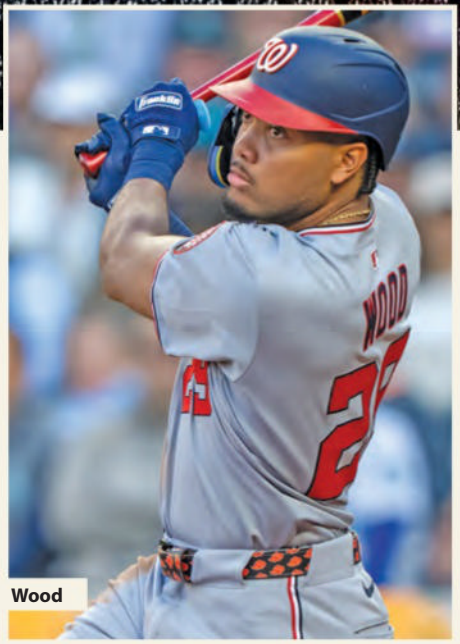
OF &UT

An asterisk denotes a player who is prospect-eligible on Opening Day 2026

TOP 50

1. Shohei Ohtani (UT/P), LAD, Age 31	Overall: #1
2. Juan Soto, NYM, Age 27	**#2**
3. Corbin Carroll, ARI, Age 25	#8
4. Julio Rodriguez, SEA, Age 25	#9
5. Aaron Judge, NYY, Age 34	#10
6. Jackson Chourio, MIL, Age 22	#12
7. Fernando Tatis Jr., SD, Age 27	#13
8. Ronald Acuña Jr., ATL, Age 28	#18
9. Kyle Tucker, FA, Age 29	#20
10. Wyatt Langford, TEX, Age 24	#22
11. James Wood, WSH, Age 23	#23
12. Roman Anthony, BOS, Age 22	#24
13. Yordan Alvarez, HOU, Age 29	#25
14. Pete Crow-Armstrong, CHC, Age 24	#32
15. Jackson Merrill, SD, Age 23	#33
16. Kyle Schwarber (UT), PHI, Age 33	#49
17. Riley Greene, DET, Age 25	#52
18. Oneil Cruz, PIT, Age 28	#54
19. Cody Bellinger, FA, Age 30	#66
20. Edward Florentino, PIT, Age 19*	#78
21. Randy Arozarena, SEA, Age 31	#79
22. Brent Rooker, ATH, Age 31	#80
23. Tyler Soderstrom (1B), ATH, Age 24	#81
24. Max Clark, DET, Age 21*	#85
25. Jose Altuve (2B), HOU, Age 36	#89
26. Jarren Duran, BOS, Age 29	#90
27. Andy Pages, LAD, Age 25	#91
28. Lawrence Butler, ATH, Age 25	#98
29. Christian Yelich, MIL, Age 34	#100
30. Michael Harris II, ATL, Age 25	#101
31. Walker Jenkins, MIN, Age 21*	#104
32. Seiya Suzuki, CHC, Age 31	#105
33. Carson Benge, NYM, Age 23*	#127
34. Byron Buxton, MIN, Age 32	#133
35. Josue De Paula, LAD, Age 21*	#134
36. Cam Smith, HOU, Age 23	#136
37. Eduardo Quintero, LAD, Age 21*	#138
38. Dylan Crews, WSH, Age 24	#141
39. Jo Adell, LAA, Age 27	#145
40. Steven Kwan, CLE, Age 28	#148
41. Addison Barger (3B), TOR, Age 26	#149
42. Luis Robert Jr., CWS, Age 28	#150
43. Teoscar Hernandez, LAD, Age 33	#152
44. Mike Trout, LAA, Age 34	#153
45. Jac Caglianone, KC, Age 23	#155
46. George Springer, TOR, Age 36	#157
47. Kyle Stowers, MIA, Age 28	#158
48. Ian Happ, CHC, Age 31	#171
49. Brandon Nimmo, TEX, Age 33	#173
50. Joshua Baez, STL, Age 23*	#178

Click the QR code to read full fantasy profiles of the top 50 OF/DH, plus rankings of 80 more, at BaseballAmerica.com


Wood

Butler

Tucker

TARGETS

JAMES WOOD, NATIONALS (#11)

Over the first half of 2025, Wood looked like he was ascending to superstar status. He hit .278/.381/.534 with 24 home runs before things came crashing down after the all-star break. Over the final 62 games, Wood hit .223/.301/.388 with a strikeout rate that ballooned to 39%. The Ks are certainly scary, but it's important to note that 2025 was only Wood's age-22 season. He's in rare air as someone so young with a 30-home run season already under his belt. There's every reason to expect Wood will find more consistency over the next few seasons and challenge for the home run title on an annual basis. (Geoff)

ROMAN ANTHONY, RED SOX (#12)

In his MLB debut season, the 21-year-old Anthony posted a 140 wRC+ and 2.7 fWAR in half a season. With Anthony boasting upper-echelon bat speed, exit velocities and barrel rates, it doesn't take a genius to target him. But because he hit just eight home runs, he might be slept on by fantasy managers if they haven't looked into the numbers too deeply. Perhaps they may even think that the tools Anthony showed in the minor leagues may not translate to the major leagues. That, of course, would appear to be hogwash. The Red Sox liked what they saw and signed Anthony to a $130 million extension before he played 50 major league games.

Over the next five years, Anthony has the tools to be a 30-home run bat annually with excellent slash lines, double-digit steal totals and 40-plus homer upside. That's a target. (Dylan)

SLEEPERS

LAWRENCE BUTLER, ATHLETICS (#28)

As a 23-year-old in 2024, Butler went 20-20 in just 450 plate appearances while also producing a 130 wRC+ and 4 fWAR. After "only" going 21-22 in 2025, projections have him as essentially a league-average bat who should again hover around 20-20. After it was revealed that Butler needed knee surgery after the season, his 22 stolen bases are all the more impressive. It also suggests his decline in sprint speed to the 35th percentile might not be "real". In other words, Butler's true talent may be closer to his excellent 2024 partial season than last year when he was not fully healthy. Playing for an A's team on the rise and in a great hitter's park, Butler has a reasonably high chance to have an excellent 2026 campaign and ends up being valued as a top 15 outfielder in dynasty. (Dylan)

JOSHUA BAEZ, CARDINALS (#50)

Baseball has a way of proving you wrong. Even when it feels like you know everything there is to know about a player, most of the time, you know nothing. The enigma of Baez fits neatly into this narrative. Baez struggled through three terrible seasons to begin his professional career before finding another gear in 2025. Now, freshly added to the Cardinals' 40-man roster, Baez looks to be a dark horse Rookie of the Year candidate in 2026. He accomplished this by cleaning up his approach and making more contact, which allowed him to get to his plus power and speed tools for the first time as a professional. If these changes hold, Baez has a chance to blossom into a star. (Geoff)

FADES

CODY BELLINGER, FREE AGENT (#19)

It feels like, year after year, Bellinger shows red flags heading into the offseason. But every year, he provides value. As he creeps toward the wrong side of 30, it's likely his luck runs out in the coming seasons. Few free agents this offseason have the sort of value swings Bellinger will experience based on his ultimate landing spot. If he lands in a place like San Francisco, for example, he could see his fantasy value tank. The chances for a repeat of his 29-home run performance in 2025 would be slim to none with the Giants. There are few better times to sell a player than after he signs his last big contract. Now is the time with Bellinger. (Geoff)

KYLE TUCKER, FREE AGENT (#9)

Would it surprise you to learn that Tucker has never hit more than 30 home runs in a season? Or stolen more than 30 bases? What if I told you that his sprint speed is in the bottom 15th percentile, and his bat speed has been essentially average for three years now? Although considered an elite fantasy outfielder—and to be fair, he has a career .273/.358/.507 line heading into his age-29 season—we shouldn't be surprised if Tucker's 20-20 floor becomes more of a stretch outcome. Projected in 2026 to be a 25ish home run bat with 20ish stolen bases, those ranges could drop to 20 and 15 beyond the next three seasons. Tucker is productive, yes, but he does not produce the elite output that we look for in a dynasty cornerstone. Assuming Tucker signs with a championship contender, it may behoove managers to shop him

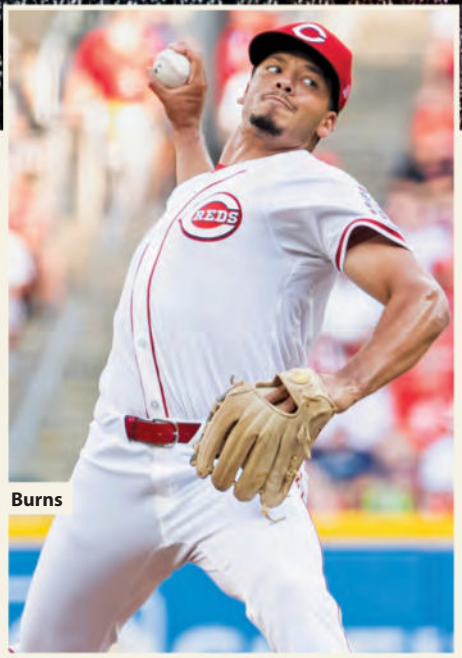
ISHIKA SAMANT/GETTY IMAGES (SOTO), STEPHEN BRASHEAR/GETTY IMAGES (WOOD), JUSTINE WILLARD/ATHLETICS/GETTY IMAGES (BUTLER), JARED LENNON/GETTY IMAGES (TUCKER)

TOP 50

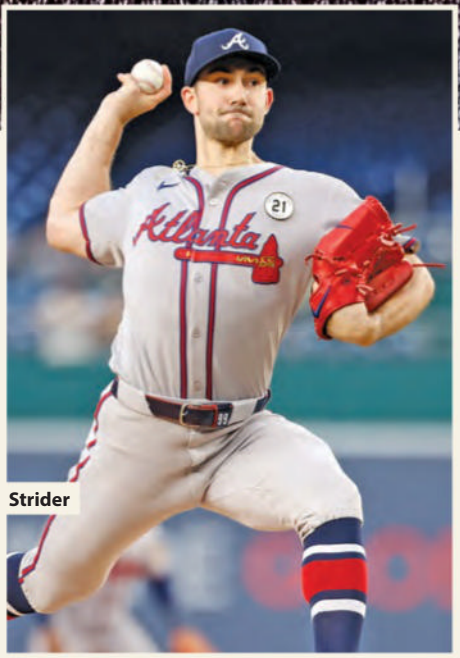
1. Shohei Ohtani (UT), LAD, Age 31	
	Overall: #1
2. Tarik Skubal, DET, Age 28	**#4**
3. Paul Skenes, PIT, Age 24	#5
4. Garrett Crochet, BOS, Age 26	#14
5. Yoshinobu Yamamoto, LAD, Age 27	#26
6. Logan Gilbert, SEA, Age 28	#28
7. Hunter Brown, HOU, Age 26	#29
8. Hunter Greene, CIN, Age 25	#38
9. Cristopher Sanchez, PHI, Age 28	#45
10. Joe Ryan, MIN, Age 29	#46
11. Eury Perez, MIA, Age 22	#47
12. Trey Yesavage, TOR, Age 23*	#53
13. Chris Sale, ATL, Age 36	#55
14. Jacob deGrom, TEX, Age 37	#56
15. George Kirby, SEA, Age 27	#57
16. Nolan McLean, NYM, Age 25*	#58
17. Logan Webb, SF, Age 28	#59
18. Bryan Woo, SEA, Age 25	#60
19. Chase Burns, CIN, Age 23	#61
20. Spencer Strider, ATL, Age 26	#62
21. Jacob Misiorowski, MIL, Age 24	#63
22. Spencer Schwellenbach, ATL, Age 26	#72
23. Mason Miller, RP, SD, Age 26	#74
24. Freddy Peralta, MIL, Age 29	#75
25. Cole Ragans, KC, Age 27	#93
26. Blake Snell, LAD, Age 32	#94
27. Max Fried, NYY, Age 31	#99
28. Cam Schlittler, NYY, Age 25	#109
29. Kyle Bradish, BAL, Age 28	#110
30. Jesus Luzardo, PHI, Age 27	#111
31. Pablo Lopez, MIN, Age 29	#112
32. Dylan Cease, TOR, Age 29	#113
33. Andres Muñoz, RP, SEA, Age 26	#114
34. Tyler Glasnow, LAD, Age 31	#115
35. Emmet Sheehan, LAD, Age 25	#116
36. Shane Bieber, TOR, Age 30	#117
37. Gerrit Cole, NYY, Age 34	#118
38. MacKenzie Gore, WSH, Age 26	#119
39. Nick Pivetta, SD, Age 32	#120
40. Michael King, SD, Age 30	#121
41. Nick Lodolo, CIN, Age 27	#122
42. Framber Valdez, FA, Age 31	#124
43. Kevin Gausman, TOR, Age 34	#125
44. Jhoan Duran, RP, PHI, Age 27	#126
45. Edwin Diaz, RP, LAD, Age 31	#128
46. Cade Smith, RP, CLE, Age 27	#147
47. Thomas White, MIA, Age 22*	#154
48. Zack Wheeler, PHI, Age 35	#156
49. Bubba Chandler, PIT, Age 23*	#161
50. Carlos Rodon, NYY, Age 32	#162

An asterisk denotes a player who is prospect-eligible on Opening Day 2026

Click the QR code to read full fantasy profiles of the top 50 pitchers, plus rankings of 150 more, at BaseballAmerica.com


Burns

Tong


Strider

TARGETS

FREDDY PERALTA, BREWERS (#24)

Peralta has been one of the more underrated starters in fantasy over the last few seasons. In 2025, he was the sixth-best starter in roto ranking. He took a big step forward in his win total while his ERA finally matched his underlying skills. An undersized righthander, Peralta has shown durability, making 30 or more starts in each season since 2023. Peralta boasts two pitches that grade as plus-plus in his fastball and changeup, as well as a pair of breaking balls that grade as average. He has a good pitch mix with command and the ability to miss bats. Peralta could potentially be traded this offseason and will enter free agency after 2026. At 30 years old, he still has a three-year window of peak seasons remaining. (Geoff)

CHASE BURNS, REDS (#19)

RoboScout loved what Burns did in the upper minors, projecting his major league equivalency to be a 1.13 WHIP and 3.52 ERA with a 26% strikeout rate and 6% walk rate. In his debut, he had a 1.32 WHIP and 3.44 xERA with a 36% strikeout rate and 8% walk rate. In other words, RoboScout thinks Burns is better than what he showed. It might be low-hanging fruit to compare Burns to another fastball/slider fireballer on the Reds in Hunter Greene, but I think it's instructive to use him as an example of how having two primary pitches of that caliber can lead to success, while also potentially resulting in a career speckled with arm injuries. Being three years younger than Greene, Burns presents more of a runway for being able to weather any potential injury hiccups in his productive fantasy period. (Dylan)

SLEEPERS

JONAH TONG, METS (#55)

With the same 64-degree arm angle that the Blue Jays' Trey Yesavage possesses, Tong too provides a semi-unique look that ate up upper-level minor league hitters to the tune of a 40.5% strikeout rate across 113.2 innings in Double-A and Triple-A. Despite Tong's lofty 10.6% walk rate, his numbers correspond to an expected 1.16 WHIP and 3.35 ERA, per RoboScout. That projection is better than Chase Burns' 2025 minor league performance or Yesavage's when translated to the major league environment. Of course, it is possible that Tong's stuff is not as electric as Burns' or not as deceptive as Yesavage's. There is a chance Tong is not in the Mets' rotation for more than 100 innings in 2026, but when it comes to long-term value, he should be a mid-3s ERA pitcher with more than a strikeout per inning for the next five or more years. (Dylan)

TATSUYA IMAI, ASTROS (#84)

The Astros signed Imai for three years and $54 million in a deal that includes two opt-outs. The 28-year-old Imai has had success in Japan and brings a pitch mix that should translate well to MLB. He has a flatter four-seam fastball similar to the Dodgers' Emmet Sheehan or the Brewers' Freddy Peralta. His slider is his best pitch and is a better version of Trey Yesavage's cut slider. Like most Japanese pitchers, Imai also has a very good splitter. All together, it's a mix of above-average-or-better pitches with average control projection. Imai has taken big strides over the past few seasons and looks poised for a potential top 30 pitching season in 2026. (Geoff)

FADES

TYLER GLASNOW, DODGERS (#34)

After 11 seasons in the big leagues, it's clear Glasnow is not capable of staying healthy over a full season. Things started to slip for him in 2025, when his strikeouts dropped and walks rose. He also saw a drop in fastball velocity and hitters chased less, swung less and made more contact against him. At 32 years old, it looks like the beginning of the end for Glasnow as a potential top 20 starter in fantasy. That's if he ever truly was one. (Geoff)

SPENCER STRIDER, BRAVES (#20)

After two strong seasons in 2022 and 2023—the latter of which resulted in 20 wins with a ridiculous 37% strikeout rate—Strider was a popular No. 1 overall pick in 2024 redraft leagues. Unfortunately, he was then struck by a right elbow injury. Having internal brace surgery rather than the full-blown Tommy John, Strider has not yet shown glimpses of his previous self, with his fastball no longer being the dominant offering it was in the past. Not only has it lost 2 mph since 2023, it's also lost two inches of induced vertical break and ride. The error bars are wide here, with the optimist viewing 2025 as Strider trying to regain his sea legs. Unfortunately, the pessimist's take that Strider might never reach his previous heights is probably more correct. Strider's draft price reflects the potential for him to once again be the top pitcher in baseball, and I think the risk is too high to hope that's the case. (Dylan)

DILIP VISHWANAT/GETTY IMAGES (SKUBAL), KATE WOOLSON/CINCINNATI REDS/GETTY IMAGES (BURNS), ISHIKA SAMANT/GETTY IMAGES (TONG), ALYSSA HOWELL/MLB PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES (STRIDER)

TOP 500

1. Shohei Ohtani, UT/P, LAD (31)
2. Juan Soto, OF, NYM (27)
3. Bobby Witt Jr., SS, KCR (26)
4. Tarik Skubal, SP, DET (28)
5. Paul Skenes, SP, PIT (24)
6. Elly De La Cruz, SS, CIN (24)
7. Gunnar Henderson, SS, BAL (25)
8. Corbin Carroll, OF, ARI (25)
9. Julio Rodriguez, OF, SEA (25)
10. Aaron Judge, OF, NYY (34)
11. Junior Caminero, 3B, TBR (22)
12. Jackson Chourio, OF, MIL (22)
13. Fernando Tatis Jr., OF, SDP (27)
14. Garrett Crochet, SP, BOS (26)
15. Nick Kurtz, 1B, ATH (23)
16. Vladimir Guerrero Jr., 1B, TOR (27)
17. Jose Ramirez, 3B, CLE (33)
18. Ronald Acuña Jr., OF, ATL (28)
19. Jazz Chisholm Jr., 2B, NYY (28)
20. Kyle Tucker, OF, FA (29)
21. Konnor Griffin, SS, PIT (20)
22. Wyatt Langford, OF, TEX (24)
23. James Wood, OF, WAS (23)
24. Roman Anthony, OF, BOS (22)
25. Yordan Alvarez, OF, HOU (29)
26. Yoshinobu Yamamoto, SP, LAD (27)
27. Zach Neto, SS, LAA (25)
28. Logan Gilbert, SP, SEA (28)
29. Hunter Brown, SP, HOU (26)
30. Francisco Lindor, SS, NYM (32)
31. Kevin McGonigle, 2B, DET (22)
32. Pete Crow-Armstrong, OF, CHC (24)
33. Jackson Merrill, OF, SDP (23)
34. Manny Machado, 3B, SDP (33)
35. Cal Raleigh, C, SEA (29)
36. Bryce Harper, 1B, PHI (33)
37. CJ Abrams, SS, WAS (25)
38. Hunter Greene, SP, CIN (25)
39. JJ Wetherholt, SS, STL (24)
40. Pete Alonso, 1B, BAL (31)
41. Ketel Marte, 2B, ARI (32)
42. Rafael Devers, 1B, SFG (29)
43. Trea Turner, SS, PHI (33)
44. Mookie Betts, SS, LAD (33)
45. Cristopher Sanchez, SP, PHI (28)
46. Joe Ryan, SP, MIN (29)
47. Eury Perez, SP, MIA (22)
48. Samuel Basallo, C, BAL (21)
49. Kyle Schwarber, UT, PHI (33)
50. Corey Seager, SS, TEX (32)
51. Matt Olson, 1B, ATL (32)
52. Riley Greene, OF, DET (25)
53. Trey Yesavage, SP, TOR (23)
54. Oneil Cruz, OF, PIT (28)
55. Chris Sale, SP, ATL (36)
56. Jacob deGrom, SP, TEX (37)
57. George Kirby, SP, SEA (27)
58. Nolan McLean, SP, NYM (25)
59. Logan Webb, SP, SFG (28)
60. Bryan Woo, SP, SEA (25)
61. Chase Burns, SP, CIN (23)
62. Spencer Strider, SP, ATL (26)
63. Jacob Misiorowski, SP, MIL (24)
64. Freddie Freeman, 1B, LAD (36)
65. William Contreras, C, MIL (28)
66. Cody Bellinger, OF, FA (30)
67. Jordan Westburg, 3B, BAL (27)
68. Geraldo Perdomo, SS, ARI (26)
69. Jackson Holliday, 2B, BAL (22)
70. Jeremy Peña, SS, HOU (28)
71. Austin Riley, 3B, ATL (29)
72. Spencer Schwellenbach, SP, ATL (26)
73. Jesus Made, SS, MIL (19)
74. Mason Miller, RP, SDP (26)
75. Freddy Peralta, SP, MIL (29)
76. Luke Keaschall, 2B, MIN (23)
77. Brice Turang, 2B, MIL (26)
78. Edward Florentino, OF, PIT (19)
79. Randy Arozarena, OF, SEA (31)
80. Brent Rooker, OF, ATH (31)
81. Tyler Soderstrom, 1B, ATH (24)
82. Josh Naylor, 1B, SEA (29)
83. Vinnie Pasquantino, 1B, KCR (28)
84. Ben Rice, C, NYY (27)
85. Max Clark, OF, DET (21)
86. Aidan Miller, SS, PHI (22)
87. Shea Langeliers, C, ATL (28)
88. Agustin Ramirez, C, MIA (24)
89. Jose Altuve, 2B, HOU (36)
90. Jarren Duran, OF, BOS (29)
91. Andy Pages, OF, LAD (25)
92. Drake Baldwin, C, ATL (25)
93. Cole Ragans, SP, KCR (27)
94. Blake Snell, SP, LAD (32)
95. Sebastian Walcott, SS, TEX (20)
96. Leo De Vries, SS, ATH (20)
97. Bryce Rainer, SS, DET (21)
98. Lawrence Butler, OF, ATH (25)
99. Max Fried, SP, NYY (31)
100. Christian Yelich, OF, MIL (34)
101. Michael Harris II, OF, ATL (25)
102. Bo Bichette, SS, FA (28)
103. Michael Busch, 1B, CHC (28)
104. Walker Jenkins, OF, MIN (21)
105. Seiya Suzuki, OF, CHC (31)
106. Bryce Eldridge, 1B, SFG (22)
107. Matt Shaw, 3B, CHC (24)
108. Sal Stewart, 1B, CIN (22)
109. Cam Schlittler, SP, NYY (25)
110. Kyle Bradish, SP, BAL (28)
111. Jesus Luzardo, SP, PHI (27)
112. Pablo Lopez, SP, MIN (29)
113. Dylan Cease, SP, TOR (29)
114. Andres Muñoz, RP, SEA (26)
115. Tyler Glasnow, SP, LAD (31)
116. Emmet Sheehan, SP, LAD (25)
117. Shane Bieber, SP, TOR (30)
118. Gerrit Cole, SP, NYY (34)
119. MacKenzie Gore, SP, WAS (26)
120. Nick Pivetta, SP, SDP (32)
121. Michael King, SP, SDP (30)
122. Nick Lodolo, SP, CIN (27)
123. Rainiel Rodriguez, C, STL (19)
124. Framber Valdez, SP, FA (31)
125. Kevin Gausman, SP, TOR (34)
126. Jhoan Duran, RP, PHI (27)
127. Carson Benge, OF, NYM (23)
128. Edwin Diaz, RP, LAD (31)
129. Ozzie Albies, 2B, ATL (29)
130. Maikel Garcia, 3B, KCR (26)
131. Willy Adames, SS, SFG (30)
132. Alex Bregman, 3B, CHC (32)
133. Byron Buxton, OF, MIN (32)
134. Josue De Paula, OF, LAD (21)
135. Royce Lewis, 3B, MIN (27)
136. Cam Smith, OF, HOU (23)
137. Jacob Wilson, SS, ATH (24)
138. Eduardo Quintero, OF, LAD (21)
139. Isaac Paredes, 3B, HOU (30)
140. Colt Emerson, SS, SEA (21)
141. Dylan Crews, OF, WAS (24)
142. Will Smith, C, LAD (31)
143. Kyle Manzardo, 1B, CLE (25)
144. Caleb Bonemer, SS, CWS (21)
145. Jo Adell, OF, LAA (27)
146. Ivan Herrera, C, STL (26)
147. Cade Smith, RP, CLE (27)
148. Steven Kwan, OF, CLE (28)
149. Addison Barger, 3B, TOR (26)
150. Luis Robert Jr., OF, CWS (28)
151. Luis Pena, SS, MIL (19)
152. Teoscar Hernandez, OF, LAD (33)
153. Mike Trout, OF, LAA (34)
154. Thomas White, SP, MIA (22)
155. Jac Caglianone, OF, KCR (23)
156. Zack Wheeler, SP, PHI (35)
157. George Springer, OF, TOR (36)
158. Kyle Stowers, OF, MIA (28)
159. Yandy Diaz, 1B, TBR (34)
160. Francisco Alvarez, C, NYM (24)
161. Bubba Chandler, SP, PIT (24)
162. Carlos Rodon, SP, NYY (32)
163. Payton Tolle, SP, BOS (24)
164. Nathan Eovaldi, SP, TEX (35)
165. Jack Flaherty, SP, DET (29)
166. Sonny Gray, SP, CIN (35)
167. Travis Bazzana, 2B, CLE (24)
168. Jonah Tong, SP, NYM (23)
169. Ranger Suarez, SP, PHI (29)
170. Tanner Bibee, SP, CLE (26)
171. Ian Happ, OF, CHC (31)
172. Anthony Volpe, SS, NYY (25)
173. Brandon Nimmo, OF, NYM (33)
174. Mark Vientos, 3B, NYM (26)
175. Eugenio Suarez, 3B, FA (34)
176. Gavin Williams, SP, CLE (25)
177. Shane McClanahan, SP, TBR (28)
178. Joshua Baez, OF, STL (23)
179. Zebby Matthews, SP, MIN (26)
180. Shane Baz, SP, BAL (26)
181. Luis Castillo, SP, SEA (32)
182. Ryan Waldschmidt, OF, ARI (24)
183. Edward Cabrera, SP, CHC (27)
184. Noelvi Marte, 3B, CIN (24)
185. Matt Chapman, 3B, SFG (33)
186. Gleyber Torres, 2B, DET (29)
187. Lazaro Montes, OF, SEA (22)
188. Brett Baty, 3B, NYM (26)
189. Jordan Lawlar, SS, ARI (23)
190. Zyhir Hope, OF, LAD (21)
191. Jonathan Aranda, 1B, TBR (28)
192. Robbie Ray, SP, SFG (33)
193. Shota Imanaga, SP, CHC (32)
194. Bryce Miller, SP, SEA (26)
195. Grayson Rodriguez, SP, BAL (25)
196. Sandy Alcantara, SP, MIA (29)
197. Ryan Pepiot, SP, TBR (27)
198. Brandon Woodruff, SP, MIL (32)
199. Jasson Dominguez, OF, NYY (23)
200. Spencer Torkelson, 1B, DET (26)
201. Nico Hoerner, 2B, CHC (29)
202. Jared Jones, SP, PIT (24)
203. Corbin Burnes, SP, ARI (30)
204. Cade Horton, SP, CHC (24)
205. Josh Hader, RP, HOU (31)
206. Justin Steele, SP, CHC (29)
207. Kristian Campbell, 2B, BOS (24)
208. Alejandro Kirk, C, TOR (27)
209. Brandon Lowe, 2B, PIT (31)
210. Masyn Winn, SS, STL (24)
211. Adley Rutschman, C, BAL (28)
212. Carter Jensen, C, KCR (22)
213. Gabriel Moreno, C, ARI (26)
214. Hunter Goodman, C, COL (26)
215. Kyle Teel, C, CWS (24)
216. Ceddanne Rafaela, OF, BOS (26)
217. Drew Rasmussen, SP, TBR (29)
218. Jeff Hoffman, RP, TOR (32)
219. Aaron Nola, SP, PHI (32)
220. Kris Bubic, SP, KCR (27)
221. Joe Musgrove, SP, SDP (32)
222. Zac Gallen, SP, ARI (29)
223. Alec Burleson, 1B, STL (27)
224. Willson Contreras, 1B, BOS (34)
225. Xavier Edwards, 2B, MIA (26)
226. Triston Casas, 1B, BOS (26)
227. Kerry Carpenter, OF, DET (28)
228. Heliot Ramos, OF, SFG (26)
229. Colton Cowser, OF, BAL (26)
230. Brenton Doyle, OF, COL (28)
231. Daylen Lile, OF, WAS (23)
232. Otto Lopez, SS, MIA (27)
233. Bryson Stott, 2B, PHI (28)
234. Trevor Story, SS, BOS (33)
235. Austin Wells, C, NYY (26)
236. Yainer Diaz, C, HOU (27)
237. Ezequiel Tovar, SS, COL (24)
238. Taj Bradley, SP, TBR (24)
239. Alec Bohm, 3B, PHI (29)
240. Wilyer Abreu, OF, BOS (27)
241. Bryan Reynolds, OF, PIT (31)
242. Xander Bogaerts, 2B, SDP (33)
243. Dansby Swanson, SS, CHC (32)
244. Marcelo Mayer, 3B, BOS (23)
245. Roki Sasaki, SP, LAD (25)
246. Trevor Rogers, SP, BAL (27)
247. Ryne Nelson, SP, ARI (27)
248. Andrew Abbott, SP, CIN (26)
249. Taylor Ward, OF, LAA (32)
250. Quinn Priester, SP, MIL (24)
251. Casey Mize, SP, DET (28)
252. Carlos Correa, SS, HOU (31)
253. Sal Frelick, OF, MIL (26)
254. Caleb Durbin, 2B, MIL (26)
255. Matt McLain, 2B, CIN (26)
256. Colt Keith, 2B, DET (24)
257. Luis Garcia Jr., 2B, WAS (26)
258. Dylan Beavers, OF, BAL (24)
259. Coby Mayo, 3B, BAL (24)
260. Chandler Simpson, OF, TBR (25)

261. Matt Wallner, OF, MIN (28)
262. Mike Sirota, OF, LAD (23)
263. Daulton Varsho, OF, TOR (29)
264. Anthony Santander, OF, TOR (31)
265. Grant Taylor, RP, CWS (24)
266. Josue Briceño, C, DET (22)
267. Kodai Senga, SP, NYM (32)
268. Josuar Gonzalez, SS, SFG (19)
269. Dalton Rushing, C, LAD (25)
270. Chase DeLauter, OF, CLE (25)
271. JoJo Parker, SS, TOR (20)
272. Liam Doyle, SP, STL (22)
273. AJ Smith-Shawver, SP, ATL (22)
274. Brody Hopkins, SP, TBR (24)
275. David Bednar, RP, NYY (30)
276. Merrill Kelly, SP, ARI (36)
277. Will Warren, SP, NYY (27)
278. Kade Anderson, SP, SEA (22)
279. Owen Caissie, OF, MIA (24)
280. Munetaka Murakami, 3B, CWS (26)
281. Brayan Bello, SP, BOS (26)
282. Jarlin Susana, SP, WAS (22)
283. Robby Snelling, SP, MIA (22)
284. Jaxon Wiggins, SP, CHC (25)
285. Jack Leiter, SP, TEX (26)
286. Connelly Early, SP, BOS (24)
287. Andrew Painter, SP, PHI (23)
288. Hurston Waldrep, SP, ATL (24)
289. Troy Melton, SP, DET (25)
290. Ryan Helsley, SP, BAL (30)
291. Pete Fairbanks, RP, MIA (31)
292. Trevor Megill, RP, MIL (31)
293. Daniel Palencia, RP, CHC (25)
294. Devin Williams, RP, NYM (30)
295. Luis Perales, SP, WAS (23)
296. Colson Montgomery, SS, CWS (24)
297. Josh Lowe, OF, TBR (28)
298. Logan O'Hoppe, C, LAA (26)
299. Trent Grisham, OF, NYY (29)
300. Dax Kilby, SS, NYY (19)
301. Michael Arroyo, 2B, SEA (22)
302. Jackson Jobe, SP, DET (24)
303. TJ Friedl, OF, CIN (30)
304. Salvador Perez, C, KCR (36)
305. Kaelen Culpepper, SS, MIN (23)
306. Jorge Polanco, 2B, SEA (32)
307. Emmanuel Rodriguez, OF, MIN (23)
308. Carlos Lagrange, SP, NYY (23)
309. Max Muncy, 3B, LAD (35)
310. Steele Hall, SS, CIN (19)
311. Braden Montgomery, OF, CWS (23)
312. Nolan Schanuel, 1B, LAA (24)
313. Ryan Clifford, 1B, NYM (23)
314. Gage Jump, SP, ATH (23)
315. Andrew Vaughn, 1B, MIL (28)
316. Kumar Rocker, SP, TEX (26)
317. Jacob Reimer, 3B, NYM (22)
318. Ryan Sloan, SP, SEA (20)
319. Lars Nootbaar, OF, STL (28)
320. Eli Willits, SS, WAS (18)
321. Cooper Pratt, SS, MIL (22)
322. Jurickson Profar, OF, ATL (33)
323. Ralphy Velazquez, 1B, CLE (21)
324. Seth Hernandez, SP, PIT (20)
325. Josh Jung, 3B, TEX (28)
326. Christian Walker, 1B, HOU (35)
327. Luis Arraez, 1B, SDP (29)
328. Jakob Marsee, OF, MIA (25)
329. Dillon Dingler, C, DET (27)
330. Jung Hoo Lee, OF, SFG (28)
331. Edgar Quero, C, CWS (23)
332. Brendan Donovan, 2B, STL (29)
333. Evan Carter, OF, TEX (23)
334. Adolis Garcia, OF, TEX (33)
335. Jesus Sanchez, OF, HOU (28)
336. Giancarlo Stanton, OF, NYY (36)
337. Marcell Ozuna, UT, FA (35)
338. Tyler O'Neill, OF, BAL (31)
339. Aiva Arquette, SS, MIA (23)
340. Ha-Seong Kim, SS, ATL (30)
341. Jordan Beck, OF, COL (25)
342. Moises Ballesteros, C, CHC (22)
343. Marcus Semien, 2B, TEX (35)
344. Brandon Pfaadt, SP, ARI (26)
345. Jose Soriano, SP, LAA (26)
346. Reese Olson, SP, DET (25)
347. Robert Suarez, RP, ATL (34)
348. Aroldis Chapman, RP, BOS (37)
349. Tanner Scott, RP, LAD (30)
350. Alfredo Duno, C, CIN (20)
351. Emil Morales, SS, LAD (20)
352. Jett Williams, SS, NYM (23)
353. Lenyn Sosa, 2B, CWS (26)
354. Charlie Condon, OF, COL (23)
355. Juneiker Caceres, OF, CLE (19)
356. Ramon Laureano, OF, SDP (32)
357. Hector Rodriguez, OF, CIN (22)
358. Raisel Iglesias, RP, ATL (35)
359. Shane Smith, SP, CWS (26)
360. Miguel Vargas, 3B, CWS (26)
361. Carson Williams, SS, TBR (23)
362. Gavin Fien, SS, TEX (19)
363. Spencer Steer, 1B, CIN (28)
364. Ethan Holliday, SS, COL (19)
365. Max Meyer, SP, MIA (27)
366. Mickey Moniak, OF, COL (28)
367. Bo Davidson, OF, SFG (24)
368. Kyson Witherspoon, SP, BOS (22)
369. Cade Cavalli, SP, WAS (26)
370. Ethan Conrad, OF, CHC (22)
371. George Lombard Jr., SS, NYY (21)
372. Theo Gillen, OF, TBR (21)
373. Bailey Ober, SP, MIN (29)
374. Noah Cameron, SP, KCR (26)
375. Arjun Nimmala, SS, TOR (21)
376. Jamie Arnold, SP, ATH (22)
377. Caden Scarborough, SP, TEX (21)
378. Ryan Weathers, SP, MIA (25)
379. Ricky Tiedemann, SP, TOR (23)
380. Joe Boyle, SP, TBR (25)
381. Luis Gil, SP, NYY (27)
382. Matthew Boyd, SP, CHC (34)
383. Mitch Keller, SP, PIT (29)
384. Clay Holmes, SP, NYM (32)
385. Trevor Larnach, OF, MIN (29)
386. Spencer Horwitz, 1B, PIT (28)
387. Joey Ortiz, SS, MIL (27)
388. Brady House, 3B, WAS (23)
389. Brady Singer, SP, CIN (28)
390. Brandon Marsh, OF, PHI (29)
391. Tommy Edman, 2B, LAD (31)
392. Chase Meidroth, SS, CWS (25)
393. Brooks Lee, SS, MIN (25)
394. Luis Morales, SP, ATH (24)
395. Parker Meadows, OF, DET (27)
396. Ryan O'Hearn, 1B, PIT (32)
397. Nate George, OF, BAL (20)
398. Jose Caballero, 2B, NYY (29)
399. Bo Naylor, C, CLE (26)
400. Andres Gimenez, 2B, TOR (27)
401. Ronny Mauricio, 2B, NYM (25)
402. Chad Patrick, SP, MIL (27)
403. J.T. Realmuto, C, FA (35)
404. Justin Wrobleski, SP, LAD (25)
405. Cole Young, 2B, SEA (22)
406. Logan Henderson, SP, MIL (24)
407. Alejandro Osuna, OF, TEX (23)
408. Reynaldo Lopez, SP, ATL (31)
409. Josh Smith, 3B, TEX (28)
410. Ben Brown, SP, CHC (26)
411. Jake Burger, 1B, TEX (30)
412. Braxton Garrett, SP, MIA (27)
413. C.J. Kayfus, 1B, CLE (24)
414. Cedric Mullins, OF, TBR (31)
415. Brock Wilken, 3B, MIL (24)
416. Cam Caminiti, SP, ATL (20)
417. Parker Messick, SP, CLE (26)
418. A.J. Ewing, OF, NYM (22)
419. Tyson Lewis, SS, CIN (20)
420. Tanner McDougal, SP, CWS (23)
421. Jonny Farmelo, OF, SEA (22)
422. Elmer Rodriguez, SP, NYY (23)
423. Khal Stephen, SP, CLE (24)
424. Zach McKinstry, OF, DET (31)
425. Gage Wood, SP, PHI (23)
426. Victor Robles, OF, SEA (29)
427. Dominic Canzone, OF, SEA (28)
428. Spencer Jones, OF, NYY (25)
429. Harrison Bader, OF, FA (32)
430. Austin Hays, OF, CIN (30)
431. Juan Sanchez, SS, TOR (19)
432. Travis Sykora, SP, WAS (22)
433. Demetrio Crisantes, 2B, ARI (22)
434. Hagen Smith, SP, CWS (23)
435. Tyler Freeman, OF, COL (27)
436. Trey Gibson, SP, BAL (24)
437. Justin Crawford, OF, PHI (22)
438. Noah Schultz, SP, CWS (23)
439. Bryan Abreu, RP, HOU (28)
440. Mike Burrows, SP, PIT (27)
441. Jhostynxon Garcia, OF, PIT (24)
442. Ryan Jeffers, C, MIN (29)
443. Carlos Narvaez, C, BOS (27)
444. David Hagaman, SP, ARI (23)
445. Kazuma Okamoto, 3B, TOR (30)
446. Aroon Escobar, 2B, PHI (21)
447. Franklin Arias, SS, BOS (20)
448. JR Ritchie, SP, ATL (23)
449. Johnny King, SP, TOR (20)
450. Seth Lugo, SP, KCR (35)
451. Sean Manaea, SP, NYM (33)
452. Christian Oppor, SP, CWS (22)
453. Braxton Ashcraft, SP, PIT (27)
454. Brandon Sproat, SP, NYM (26)
455. Xavier Isaac, 1B, TBR (22)
456. Braylon Doughty, SP, CLE (20)
457. Slade Caldwell, OF, ARI (20)
458. Brendan Summerhill, OF, TBR (23)
459. Slade Cecconi, SP, CLE (26)
460. Lucas Giolito, SP, FA (32)
461. Carlos Estevez, RP, KCR (32)
462. Charles Davalan, OF, LAD (22)
463. Owen Murphy, SP, ATL (23)
464. Kendry Chourio, SP, KCR (19)
465. Devin Fitz-Gerald, 2B, TEX (21)
466. Esteban Mejia, SP, BAL (19)
467. Josh Hammond, SS, KCR (20)
468. Ian Seymour, SP, TBR (27)
469. Paul Goldschmidt, 1B, FA (38)
470. JD Dix, SS, ARI (21)
471. Jurrangelo Cijntje, SP, SEA (23)
472. Jacob Melton, OF, TBR (26)
473. J.P. Crawford, SS, SEA (31)
474. Curtis Mead, 1B, CWS (25)
475. Kevin Alvarez, OF, HOU (18)
476. Brayan Rocchio, SS, CLE (25)
477. Sean Murphy, C, ATL (31)
478. Heston Kjerstad, OF, BAL (27)
479. Gavin Stone, SP, LAD (26)
480. Nolan Gorman, 2B, STL (26)
481. Felix Bautista, RP, BAL (30)
482. Rhys Hoskins, 1B, FA (33)
483. Joey Cantillo, SP, CLE (26)
484. Drew Gilbert, OF, SFG (25)
485. Jake Cronenworth, 2B, SDP (32)
486. Jeff McNeil, 2B, ATH(34)
487. Jorge Soler, OF, LAA (34)
488. Tyler Stephenson, C, CIN (29)
489. Jonathan India, 2B, KCR (29)
490. Hayden Birdsong, SP, SFG (25)
491. Isaac Collins, OF, MIL (29)
492. Ryan Mountcastle, 1B, BAL (29)
493. Denzel Clarke, OF, ATH (26)
494. Patrick Bailey, C, SFG (27)
495. Ke'Bryan Hayes, 3B, CIN (29)
496. Blaze Alexander, 3B, ARI (27)
497. Keibert Ruiz, C, WAS (27)
498. Yusei Kikuchi, SP, LAA (34)
499. Nathaniel Lowe, 1B, BOS (30)
500. Cristian Javier, SP, HOU (28)

FYPD

First-year player draft selections come from three primary sources: draft picks from college (4YR) or high school (HS), international free agency (IFA) or as foreign professionals from Japan (NPB) or Korea (KBO).
Top 50 compiled by Geoff Pontes.

1. Tatsuya Imai, RHP, HOU (NPB)
2. Liam Doyle, LHP, STL (4YR)
3. Kade Anderson, LHP, SEA (4YR)
4. Kazuma Okamoto, 3B, TOR (NPB)
5. Munetaka Murakami, 1B/3B, CWS (NPB)
6. Dax Kilby, SS, NYY (HS)
7. JoJo Parker, SS, TOR (HS)
8. Eli Willits, SS, WAS (HS)
9. Seth Hernandez, RHP, PIT (HS)
10. Luis Hernandez, SS, SFG (IFA)
11. Johenssy Colome, SS, ATH (IFA)
12. Steele Hall, SS, CIN (HS)
13. Gavin Fien, SS, TEX (HS)
14. Aiva Arquette, SS, MIA (4YR)
15. Ethan Conrad, OF, CHC (4YR)
16. Ethan Holliday, SS, COL (HS)
17. Jamie Arnold, LHP, ATH (4YR)
18. Josh Hammond, SS, KC (HS)
19. Xavier Neyens, SS, HOU (HS)
20. Angeibel Gomez, OF, KC (IFA)
21. Ethan Frey, OF, HOU (4YR)
22. Kyson Witherspoon, RHP, BOS (4YR)
23. Jace LaViolette, OF, CLE (4YR)
24. Tyler Bremner, RHP, LAA (4YR)
25. Gage Wood, RHP, PHI (4YR)
26. Billy Carlson, SS, CWS (HS)
27. Fabricio Blanco, SS, TBR (IFA)
28. Kruz Schoolcraft, LHP, SDP (HS)
29. Kane Kepley, OF, CHC (4YR)
30. Francisco Renteria, SS, PHI (IFA)
31. Quentin Young, SS, MIN (HS)
32. Sung-Mun Song, 2B/3B, SDP (KBO)
33. Aidan West, SS, LAD (HS)
34. Andrew Fischer, 3B, MIL (4YR)
35. Ike Irish, C/OF, BAL (4YR)
36. Kayson Cunningham, SS, ARI (HS)
37. Mitch Voit, 2B, NYM (4YR)
38. Riley Quick, RHP, MIN (4YR)
39. Brendan Summerhill, OF, TBR (4YR)
40. Slater de Brun, OF, TBR (HS)
41. Victor Valdez, SS, TBR (IFA)
42. Wandy Asigen, SS, NYM (IFA)
43. Foster Griffin, LHP, WAS (NPB)
44. Brandon Compton, OF, MIA (4YR)
45. Emanuel Luna, OF, STL (IFA)
46. Santiago Solarte, SS, MIA (IFA)
47. Tanner Franklin, RHP, STL (4YR)
48. Devin Taylor, OF, ATH (4YR)
49. Nick Becker, SS, SEA (HS)
50. Jaden Fauske, OF, CWS (HS)

American League

ORGANIZATION REPORTS

PAGE 64 A scintillating run through the Arizona Fall League highlights the upside of the Mariners' Jonny Farmelo, despite a series of injuries.

Montero Takes Giant Step Forward In DSL Repeat

Repeating the Dominican Summer League is never ideal. But for Dominican shortstop **Edgar Montero**, it was a reality check.

The Athletics signed him for $1.2 million in 2024. In his pro debut that year, he slashed .239/.398/.375 with three homers in 54 games.

Montero knew something needed to change. So he spent the entire offseason working on his physique as he prepared for the 2025 season.

The results paid off as Montero batted .313/.484/.580 with nine homers in 55 games. He helped power the DSL Athletics to the league finals and made the league's all-star team.

Most notably, he saw a 3 mph increase in his average exit velocity, while also proving himself at shortstop and improving his long-term outlook at the position.

"He understood the importance of being in shape to have a big and long career," A's Latin America scouting supervisor **Juan Mosquera** said. "That was the biggest factor in his success."

Last fall, the A's sent Montero to their Arizona complex in Mesa to participate in instructional league. He played in unofficial games and spent time working with instructors.

It was the first time the 19-year-old had visited the United States, giving him a glimpse of what he had been working for his entire life. It also sets up what's to come in 2026: his stateside debut in the Arizona Complex League.

As much success as he had, Montero has plenty to build on. He will need to adapt to advanced pitching in the U.S. while also improving his contact rate after he whiffed at 27% of pitches he swung at in 2025. He helped compensate for the swing-and-miss by making more authoritative contact.

"He also made some mistakes, too," Mosquera said. "He's going to need to be more focused on executing his plan at the plate, like looking to hunt for more fastballs to cause damage."

—JESÚS CANO

Edgar Montero SS, Athletics

Nunez, Foster Could Take Part In New-Look Bullpen

Unexpected bullpen contributors are nothing new for the Orioles, from all-star closer **Felix Bautista** to surprising setup men **Yennier Cano** and **Cionel Perez**.

A pair of under-the-radar relief prospects added at the 2025 trade deadline might be next: righthanders **Anthony Nunez** and **Cameron Foster**.

The duo arrived in a pair of trades with the Mets—Nunez in the deal for **Cedric Mullins** and Foster for **Gregory Soto**—and both were added to the 40-man roster in the fall. Each has a chance to make Baltimore's new-look bullpen out of spring training.

"They both threw great for us after the trade deadline," Orioles president of baseball operations **Mike Elias** said. "We're excited about them."

Nunez, a 24-year-old converted infielder, pitched across three levels between the two organizations and finished at Triple-A with an aggregate strikeout rate near 38%. He pitched to a 2.06 ERA and 0.81 WHIP in 56.2 innings, dominating with a pair of upper-90s fastballs and a broad arsenal led by potential plus secondaries in his kick changeup and sweeper.

Nunez boasts a unique story, having been drafted as an infielder by the Padres out of high school in 2019. After being released in 2021, he was eligible to attend Division II Tampa, where he hit for two years, then helped the club win a D-II national championship in 2024 as he started to work as a pitcher as well.

Signed by the Mets as a pitcher after going undrafted in 2024, Nunez impressed the Orioles with his ability to miss bats, his fastball command profile and the upside as he continues to learn on the mound. He finished 2025 as the closer at Triple-A Norfolk.

Foster will be 27 this season after spending most of 2025 dominating the Eastern League before the trade. He had a 3.38 ERA with a 33% strikeout rate and a 1.38 WHIP at Triple-A post-trade. His mid-90s four-seamer and high-80s cutter headline a bat-missing arsenal.

—JON MEOLI

Holobetz Boosts Profile In First Year With BoSox

Righthander **John Holobetz** had long intrigued the Red Sox.

He went undrafted as an eligible Old Dominion sophomore in 2023 then rebuffed Boston's offer to sign out of the Cape Cod League that summer.

A year later, the Red Sox hosted him at Fenway Park for a workout and saw a player with intriguing delivery and pitch shape traits who just needed more strength and power.

Though the Brewers drafted Holobetz in the fifth round in 2024, Boston's interest was undiminished. And so, in the April 2025 deal that sent **Quinn Priester** to Milwaukee for a supplemental first-round pick—which eventually became **Marcus Phillips**—and outfielder **Yophery Rodriguez**, the Red Sox also acquired Holobetz in May as a player to be named.

The righthander proved consistently solid in his first full professional season.

Holobetz's ability to pound the strike zone—his 4% walk rate was the third-lowest in the minors of any pitcher who threw at least 100 innings—allowed him to handle a 124.2-inning workload. Across three levels, culminating with six appearances at Double-A Portland, he forged a 3.03 ERA and respectable 24% strikeout rate.

Holobetz's intrigue starts with a fastball that averages around 93 mph but has topped out at 97. While the pitch is lighter on velocity, it has other attributes of note. He delivers from a low release height of 5.3 feet with above-average extension of 6.5 feet and carry of 17 inches to beat hitters at the top of the zone.

The Red Sox are hopeful that increased physicality on his 6-foot-3 frame will also permit his secondaries—a low-80s slider, mid-80s cutter and 86-87 mph changeup—to improve from below-average to average or better.

His slider showed a promising ability to dodge bats at Double-A.

With a little more gas, Holobetz's precision could allow him to emerge as a back-end starter, with a fallback as a multi-innings reliever. That outlook has positioned him as an important depth piece.

—ALEX SPEIER

BRANDON SLOTER/GETTY IMAGES (FARMELO), BILL MITCHELL (MONTERO)

McDougal Proves His Mettle As A Starter

In spring training last year, the White Sox pondered when point righthander **Tanner McDougal** might move to the bullpen.

The 2021 fifth-round pick had touched triple digits on his fastball repeatedly and touted a curveball that averaged 3,000 rpm of spin and a slider that was even nastier.

But McDougal also had walked 101 batters in 161.2 innings since coming back from Tommy John surgery in 2023, and he ended 2024 at Low-A Kannapolis after a demotion.

"The consistency, historically, has not been what Tanner himself would tell you he wants it to be," White Sox farm director **Paul Janish** said.

Fast-forward to the present, and McDougal, who turns 23 this season, was the most "obvious" addition to the 40-man roster in November, per senior advisor to pitching **Brian Bannister**.

McDougal totaled 136 strikeouts in 113 innings with a 3.27 ERA in 2025, spending the second half with Double-A Birmingham on its run to a Southern League title. He walked a career-low 10.2% of batters.

"Gained a lot of my confidence back," McDougal said. "I lost some of it having TJ, coming back and struggling. But it just reinforces the thoughts that, 'I'm capable of doing this, and I am where I belong.' "

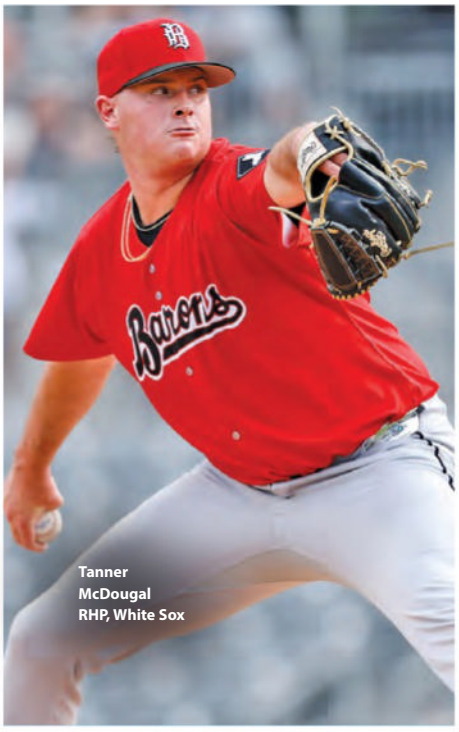
The son of a longtime minor league reliever, McDougal has a burly 6-foot-5 build. He has spent the past two winters training at Cressey Sports Performance.

The White Sox are encouraged that he held upper-90s velocity deep into games at the end of his longest pro season and also by his high-80s gyro slider, which ran a nearly 50% miss rate.

"The walks (and) strikes were something we were watching, and he went out and really attacked the zone at new rates," Bannister said.

"He can pitch in multiple roles, like a **Grant Taylor**, but I think for now, especially with what he did midway through the year and second half, he proved that he's a starter for now and can handle the durability of starting."

—JAMES FEGAN



Tanner McDougal RHP, White Sox

Rosario Has Raw Power The Guardians Covet

The Guardians are always on the hunt for power, especially in the outfield, and 21-year-old **Alfonsin Rosario** may one day fit the bill.

Cleveland acquired him after the 2024 season when they traded reliever **Eli Morgan** to the Cubs.

Rosario spent most of the 2025 season at High-A Lake County and joined Double-A Akron in August. The 6-foot-2, 222-pound righthanded hitter combined for 21 home runs while batting .251/.345/.461 in 115 games.

"Alfonsin is a physical presence," Guardians assistant GM **James Harris** said. "We are excited about his ability to play all three outfield positions, as he possesses uncommon strength, power, speed and agility for a guy his size."

Rosario was drafted by the Cubs in the sixth round in 2023 out of P27 Academy in Lexington, S.C. In 2024 with Low-A Myrtle Beach, he hit 16 home runs and stole 20 bases.

Rosario is obviously not yet a finished product, but the organization is optimistic about his progress and his potential. He still needs to work on his plate discipline and reading the strike zone, but his power is real.

"He is currently working on his jumps and reaction times to help complement his above-average range and arm strength," Harris said. "Alfonsin has the tools and desire to be a threat on the bases as well."

The Guardians' light-hitting lineup could use a dose of power, especially in the outfield. Many have applied, but few have delivered. Rosario could potentially become a candidate.

"Offensively, bat speed and power are his calling card," Harris said. "Our hitting team has emphasized posture in an effort to improve his contact rates.

"In the clubhouse, Rosario is a hard worker, loves the weight room and is a good teammate who bridges the gap as a bilingual speaker. He is passionate about the game and is locked in during advance meetings."

—JIM INGRAHAM

Salcedo Rides Attacking Mindset To Low-A

The Tigers signed Venezuelan righthander **Kelvis Salcedo** in 2023, just before his 17th birthday.

His discovery has bolstered the organization's international presence, which also counts fellow Venezuelan prospects **Josue Briceño** and **Franyerber Montilla**.

Salcedo reached Low-A Lakeland as a 19-year-old in 2025 after spending most of the season in the Rookie-level Florida Complex League.

"I've always thought 'bullish' is a good way to describe his style," a National League scout said. "He's not scared to attack . . .

"Most of the arms at his level are raw, but what stood out the most to me was the way he seems to know himself. A lot of guys don't at that age.

"I think that confidence is going to be a pretty useful tool for him."

Standing in at 6 feet and 255 pounds, Salcedo admits the guidance of FCL pitching coach **Willians Moreno** was key in his ability to adapt to his first season in the U.S. following two in the Dominican Summer League.

Mixing a 99 mph heater with a sinker, splitter and slider, Salcedo worked a mixed assignment, starting eight of his 12 outings in Rookie ball with a 1.99 ERA and 53 strikeouts in 45.1 innings.

From a distance, Lakeland manager Rene Rivera was keeping an eye on Salcedo and knew it wouldn't be long before he would be promoted to the Florida State League.

"We all know Salcedo is a very talented pitcher," Rivera said. "He did a great job in Rookie ball. He came into Lakeland and continued to perform at a high level."

He made four of six FSL outings in relief, posting a 1.54 ERA with 32 strikeouts in 23.1 innings.

"He played a huge role in our playoff run," Rivera said. "Everyone knows he's still very young, but the talent is clearly there.

"He's a great kid who listens, works and continues to learn."

—EMILY WALDON

Huezo Goes Down Under To Make Up At-Bats

After playing just 67 games in 2025, **Anthony Huezo** headed to the Australian Baseball League this offseason for more at-bats.

The speedy 20-year-old outfielder made the most of his time with the Sydney Blue Sox while showcasing the skills that have Astros officials excited about his potential.

"We're really excited about him. He's a left-right outfielder with a chance to play center field," Astros farm director **Sam Niedorf** said.

The Astros drafted Huezo in the 12th round in 2023 out of Etiwanda High in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif. He began his pro career at 17 years old with a 12-game stint in the Florida Complex League.

Huezo played 48 games in 2024, 40 of them in the FCL with a seven-game stop at High-A Asheville and one game at Double-A Corpus Christi. He didn't produce much offensively at any of those stops.

Huezo fared better in 2025, which he began in the FCL and concluded with Low-A Fayetteville. He batted .262/.371/.458 with eight home runs and 18 stolen bases in 67 games.

He continued to produce down under, going 28-for-86 (.326) with six homers and a 1.018 OPS through his first 27 ABL games.

"He missed a chunk of time this past year," Niedorf said. "This was a chance to get him some more at-bats and really let him and his skills play to see what he could do. We're really excited about him."

The 6-foot-2, 185-pound Huezo has above-average speed with the athleticism to play center field. He has good bat-to-ball skills with the power potential to do damage. He'll need to work on controlling the strike zone, but he has shown enough already to draw raves.

"He's someone I'm really excited about given the age and the tool set of the player," Niedorf said.

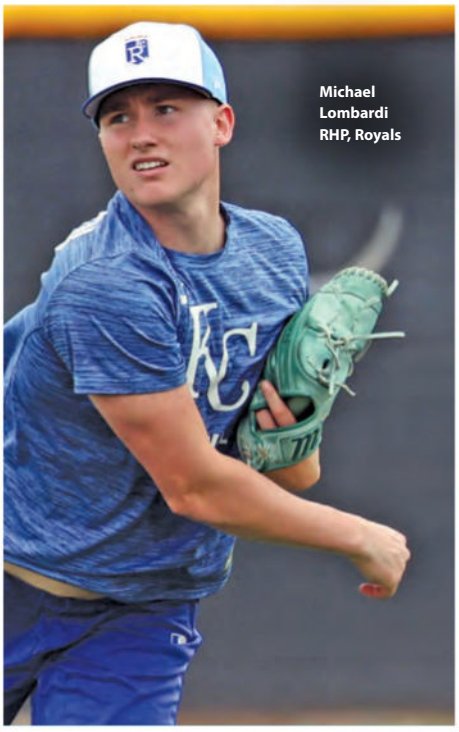
Huezo is most likely to begin the 2026 season at Fayetteville, Niedorf said, but there is a chance he could start at Asheville if there are injuries or other unforeseen circumstances.

—JOSE DE JESUS ORTIZ

Royals Bet On Lombardi's Competitive Nature

The Royals focused heavily on athleticism in the 2025 draft, selecting preps **Sean Gamble** and **Josh Hammond** with their top two picks.

Kansas City went to the college ranks with their third selection, drafting Tulane two-way player **Michael Lombardi** in the second round. He was announced as a righthander and will be developed as a starter, despite working from the bullpen for much of his college career.



Michael Lombardi RHP, Royals

The pre-draft concerns regarding Lombardi were whether he could build the durability to start and develop a better third pitch to round out an arsenal highlighted by two plus pitches in his fastball and curveball.

The Royals' scouting staff, led by director **Brian Bridges**, was on Lombardi going back to the 2024 fall ball season. In fact, area scout **Cody Clark** focused heavily on him throughout the 2025 season.

Even when seeing him working out of the bullpen while also being a productive outfielder, the Royals believed Lombardi's future was in the rotation.

"You're dealing with an athlete who's highly competitive," Bridges said about Lombardi, "a two-way player who wants to concentrate on pitching, with limited mileage on the arm, athleticism and feel to pitch."

Focusing strictly on pitching will allow Lombardi to continue working on the growth and improvement needed. He didn't use his changeup much in college, but Bridges said that he has feel for the pitch and can develop it to be an average offering.

Lombardi's outstanding makeup is another key attribute, first observed by the Royals' scouts and later by the player development staff once he got to the team's minor league complex for the fall instructional league program.

"He wants to be successful," Bridges said. "He's a good learner . . . a highly competitive kid who wants to succeed."

—BILL MITCHELL

Gregory-Alford Finds Redemption In Pro Debut

Trey Gregory-Alford was watching it snow when he received a text just before the first spring game of his senior season at Coronado High in Colorado Springs.

"You sure the game isn't canceled?" Angels area scout **Jayson Durocher** asked.

"We're still playing," Gregory-Alford replied.

Gregory-Alford pitched three innings through snowfall that day, striking out six of the 10 batters he faced. He sat in the mid 90s with his fastball.

The Angels did not miss that game, or the 10 other starts his senior year in 2024.

In the finale, Gregory-Alford pitched into the seventh inning of the Colorado 4A region semifinal without allowing a hit. Later, a run-producing double not only ended his no-hit bid, but also his prep career.

Two months later, the Angels drafted the Rocky Mountain-sized righthander in the 11th round and signed him to a post-10th-round record $1,957,500.

Making his pro debut in 2025, Gregory-Alford pitched a combined 2.86 ERA across the Arizona Complex League and Low-A Inland Empire.

"It's one thing to be able to pitch at the premium velocities, but it's also another thing to sustain that through outings," Angels assistant GM **Joey Prebynski** said. "It's a credit to Trey and all the work he put in . . . and the routine that he created for himself since he's come into pro ball."

Fifteen months removed from his prep semifinal loss, Gregory-Alford found redemption. He allowed one run over seven innings in the ACL semifinals to help propel the Angels to the league finals, which they won.

Promoted to the California League for six starts, Gregory-Alford allowed just five runs while striking out 20 in 25.1 innings. Inland Empire advanced to the league championship series, though they were swept by San Jose.

"In high school, we never won anything, so going for one championship was already cool enough," Gregory-Alford said. "Almost getting two championships in a single season is something you aren't going to forget."

—TAYLOR BLAKE WARD

DANNY PARKER/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (MCDOUGAL), BILL MITCHELL (LOMBARDI)

Bohorquez Emerges As One Of 'Best Arms' In System

Righthander **Adrian Bohorquez** made just five appearances at High-A Cedar Rapids, plus a Midwest League playoff start that lasted less than an inning because of a long power outage. Yet, he still left a strong impression.

In those 23 innings, Bohorquez showed enough potential that people inside the organization view him as a breakout candidate in 2026. He posted a 3.52 ERA after he was promoted from Low-A in August, with 28 strikeouts and six walks.

"What I'm incredibly proud of him for is he dealt with walks early on in Low-A," Twins farm director **Drew MacPhail** said. "He continued to get in shape and continued to really work hard with our pitching group on his command training. In High-A, he walked 6%, which is incredibly impressive."

Bohorquez, who signed for $10,000 out of Venezuela in 2023, has a starter's build at 6-foot-1, 190 pounds. His fastball sat around 95 mph and touched 98 mph at the end of the season. He mixes a slider around 88-90 mph, a hard curveball at 80-83 and is working on a changeup.

"He's right in the mix as one of our best arms," MacPhail said.

Bohorquez, who will turn 21 in March, had middling numbers at Low-A Fort Myers because of his issues with walks. He yielded a 4.66 ERA in 48.1 innings with 57 strikeouts and 25 walks. He held opposing hitters to a .192 average.

Once he reduced his walks, the results followed. In his last seven outings at Low-A prior to his promotion, he had a 1.91 ERA with a 29% strikeout rate and a 7% walk rate.

"Just trusting his stuff and throwing it over the heart of the plate because his stuff is electric and it's really going to play," MacPhail said. "He doesn't have to be too fine with it."

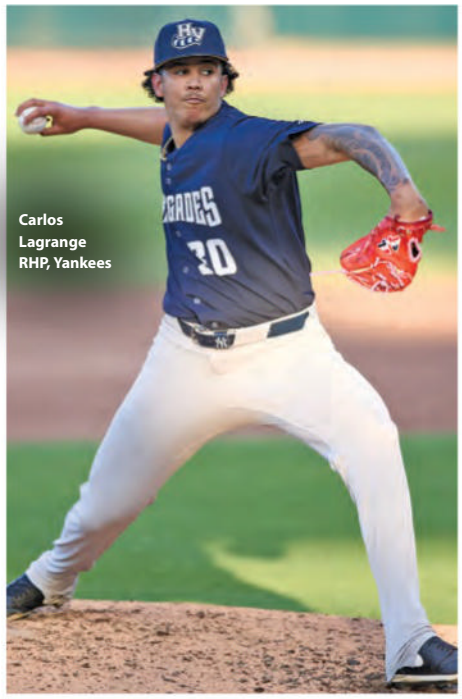
If Bohorquez can improve his changeup, which flashes "really impressive depth," according to MacPhail, the Twins see big upside.

"He needs to get a little bit better at landing it in the zone, which I think is going to help tick up the swing and miss," MacPhail said.

—BOBBY NIGHTENGALE

Imposing Righty Lagrange Blazes With Fastball

In terms of sheer arm talent, there might not be anyone in the system with higher upside than 22-year-old righthander **Carlos Lagrange**.



Carlos Lagrange RHP, Yankees

Harnessing it consistently had proven to be a challenge—until 2025.

Signed for just $10,000 out of the Dominican Republic in 2022, Lagrange is an overpowering 6-foot-7, 248-pound righty who seemed to mostly put it all together last season.

The 22-year-old reduced his walk rate from 20% in 2024 to about 12% last year while tossing 120 innings between High-A Hudson Valley and Double-A Somerset. He struck out 168 batters, more than any minor league pitcher but **Jonah Tong** (179) and **Elmer Rodriguez** (176).

Lagrange tops 100 mph with relative ease. Among pitchers who threw their four-seamers 400 or more times last year, just five registered the same kind of velocity. He also throws a sweeper, gyro slider and changeup.

Lagrange's ability to reach his ceiling will largely be dictated by fastball command, which has often let him down and contributed to outings with high walk rates. He issued five or more free passes in five of his 15 Double-A starts.

"I work at it a lot, that's the most important thing," Lagrange said during the 2025 season in an interview translated by Double-A defensive coach **Uziel Viloria**.

"With my fastball, I go back to my mechanics. When my mechanics are good, my command is there. Sometimes, I have to make some adjustments, but when the mechanics are good, the command is good."

Many evaluators believe Lagrange is ticketed for a high-leverage bullpen role in the future, but he will continue to develop as a starter.

One rival American League evaluator believed Lagrange could have retired big league hitters in a bullpen role last year, and his path to the majors would seemingly be vastly accelerated if that transition is made.

—MIKE ASHMORE

The Prospect Of A Healthy Farmelo Excites Mariners

Outfielder **Jonny Farmelo's** upside feels untapped following a pair of injury-plagued seasons to start his pro career.

Drafted 29th overall in 2023, Farmelo's pro debut season with Low-A Modesto ended in June 2024 with a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee.

Then a stress fracture in his rib limited him to just 29 games for High-A Everett in 2025.

In the Arizona Fall League, Farmelo might have finally gotten the boost he needed.

The 21-year-old flashed elite speed in the AFL, finishing his 23-game stint with 12 stolen bases and a league-best three triples. He batted .234/.406/.442 with two home runs and 20 walks.

"Having him play as well as he did and then being healthy into the offseason, that was a big goal of ours," Mariners farm director **Justin Toole** said.

"And obviously you got to see glimpses of the speed. You got to see glimpses of the defense, the bat—everything that you hoped would show up after the injuries were there."

Toole is eager to see a full, healthy season that showcases Farmelo's blend of power and speed, the latter of which plays in center field.

"He's going to be able to hit the ball on the ground and run and get to first and then steal a couple bases, get himself in scoring position," Toole said. "He's also got the ability to drive the ball out of the park. Those guys are tough, and they're also rare to find."

After coming within one win of the World Series last year, the Mariners will be looking for prospects who can help the big league team win. While Farmelo might still be a few years away, Toole sees him as a guy who will make a big impact when he gets the call.

"There's a lot of things that you like with his game, that you could see him impacting our major league team at some point," Toole said.

"And not knowing exactly when that's going to be, I know he'll be ready for whenever that opportunity comes."

—SHANE LANTZ

Reliever Cook Finishes Strong At Double-A

Alex Cook needed some time last year to get his right shoulder healthy and re-acclimated to a relief role.

Then he showed the Rays what he could do by making 13 impressive outings at Double-A Montgomery. He posted a 2.30 ERA over 15.2 innings, with three walks and 18 strikeouts.

Cook closed the season with 10 scoreless innings in which he allowed just three hits and used his high-end fastball and power slider.

He added four scoreless appearances for the Southern League-champion Biscuits, striking out six in five playoff innings while allowing two hits.

Though the sample size was limited, Cook impressed the Rays enough that they added the 25-year-old to the 40-man roster to protect him from being taken in the Rule 5 draft.

Tampa Bay drafted Cook in the 12th round in 2022 out of Colby JC in Kansas.

"It's a big arm," Rays assistant GM **Kevin Ibach** said. "We saw him initially out of the chute several years ago mid to upper 90s out of the bullpen. We thought that might be the future."

But the Rays' pitching group decided Cook has a deep enough arsenal to start, so he tried that in 2024 but was sidelined after eight outings by a right shoulder strain.

He didn't return to game action until last June, working again as a reliever.

"We got him back in Double-A into the bullpen role where, honestly, he probably feels most comfortable," Ibach said. "Let him lean on his fastball and slider and really overpower hitters down the stretch.

"He showed a lot of the same stuff that we saw initially out of the draft."

Plus, Ibach said, Cook is "another guy . . . that there's always trade interest in. And we certainly want to make sure that he makes his debut in our uniform."

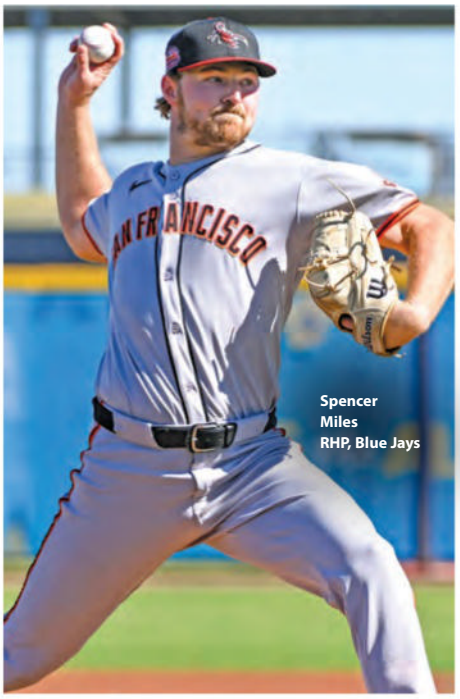
—MARC TOPKIN

Rule 5 Pick Baumler Projects To Make Bullpen

Working on a budget and short on premium minor league arms, the Rangers decided they were going to be active in the Rule 5 draft at the 2025 Winter Meetings.

After a post-Rule 5 trade with the Pirates, the Rangers had their guy.

Pittsburgh selected 24-year-old righthander



Spencer Miles RHP, Blue Jays

Carter Baumler from the Orioles' system, even though he has barely pitched above Double-A.

But the characteristics of his pitches convinced the Rangers that the 23-year-old was worth adding.

"He's somebody we did a lot of work on as an amateur," Rangers GM **Ross Fenstermaker** said. "He's had a little bit of injury history, but this was the first year he really had a successful season. He took off. He touched multiple levels."

The Orioles selected Baumler in the fifth and final round of the shortened 2020 draft. He signed for $1.5 million out of high school in West Des Moines, Iowa.

Baumler didn't make his pro debut until 2022 after having Tommy John surgery in 2021. He dealt with a shoulder injury in 2023 that lingered into 2024.

Baumler tossed a career-high 39.2 innings in 2025 across three levels, posting a 2.04 ERA. He struck out 29% of batters.

The Rangers saw a jump in his arsenal that could help him become a starting pitcher, though the plan is for him to work as a reliever in 2026.

"He had a big jump in his stuff," Fenstermaker said. "It's a big fastball, unique characteristics, good secondaries. Strikes are there to match the pedigree."

The bullpen is also a more forgiving way for the Rangers to break Baumler into the majors.

He has a good chance to make an Opening Day bullpen that had to replace five pitchers and will be back-filled by a group of relievers with little to no big league experience.

For example, among the Rangers' projected relievers are 2018 first-round righthander **Cole Winn** and **Luis Curvelo**, who made his MLB debut in 2025.

—JEFF WILSON

Power-Armed Miles Joins Spring Bullpen Mix

As the Rule 5 draft approached in early December, **Spencer Miles** felt like he might make sense for a rebuilding club choosing early in the process.

The 25-year-old righthander's career had been stalled by back and elbow surgeries, but he was coming off a solid showing in the Arizona Fall League that piqued interest.

That's when the Blue Jays introduced a plot twist by selecting Miles with the 27th pick.

Toronto adds him to a crowded, win-now bullpen mix. How he fits will be sorted out during spring training, leaving Miles to process how "it's kind of crazy going to a team that was just in the World Series."

Miles is a 6-foot-3 righty who pitches in the mid 90s and throws a nasty downer curveball. He said he views himself as "kind of a speculative arm."

Toronto would not have drafted Miles if they didn't believe he at least had a chance to stick. Now, he joins 2024 Rule 5 pick **Angel Bastardo**, who spent the 2025 season on the injured list, in fighting for a bullpen role.

Blue Jays assistant GM **Mike Murov** described Miles' fastball as a pitch that models as elite. He also throws a cutter that is effective against lefthanded hitters.

"If he's able to post on a consistent basis and keep the command and keep the stuff, then he's a useful pitcher on any team," Murov said. "We are hopeful that we see that version of him, and if we do then it's going to be easy to keep him."

The Giants drafted Miles in the fourth round in 2022 out of Missouri. He made just 10 minor league appearances in four pro seasons. He missed all of 2025 after having Tommy John surgery in June 2024.

Miles described returning to the mound in the AFL as "magical" and wants to bring similar energy to spring training.

"I like to throw hard, throw in the zone and strike some guys out," he said. "If I do that, I'll just be fine. Hopefully, that gives me a shot of making the team."

—SHI DAVIDI

BRIAN WESTERHOLT/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (LAGRANGE), NORM HALL/MLB PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES (MILES)

National League

ORGANIZATION REPORT

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The Nationals' Seaver King went through a learning process in 2025 before finding a swing and mentality that works in the Arizona Fall League.

Forbes Looks To Maximize 'Untapped Potential'

Thinking back, 21-year-old righthander **Patrick Forbes** considers it a blessing in disguise.

Hit by a pitch early in his sophomore season at Louisville, Forbes broke a bone in his left hand, bringing an end to his days as a two-way player.

The focus on pitching has worked out well so far—and, it seems, he is only getting started.

"I think everything happens for a reason," Forbes said. "I'm not mad about it now. I like the pitcher-only life."

Forbes always envisioned himself as either a shortstop or center fielder, and when he was younger, he spent relatively little time on the mound. He logged just 13 innings entering his senior season of high school.

He split time between hitting and pitching at Louisville, but the injury simplified things, and he adjusted quickly on the mound.

"I think I had a lot of untapped potential there," Forbes said. "I think I still do, honestly."

Evaluators agree. With a fastball that sits in the mid 90s and touches 100 mph to go with a wipeout slider, he already has two plus offerings. After a stint with USA Baseball's Collegiate National Team in 2024, Forbes was drafted 29th overall by the D-backs in 2025.

Forbes has yet to make his pro debut. He is likely to open this season at High-A Hillsboro.

"This offseason, I've been working on a cutter and a changeup," Forbes said. "I think those have progressed really well. I did use them last year in the college season, but just a little bit, only like 5% of the time.

"Just being able to show hitters that I can throw multiple pitches in any sort of count is the biggest thing, especially being a starter."

Forbes also could stand to become a more consistent strike-thrower.

"I try not to dig too much into mechanics and stuff like that; I've never been big into that," he said. "But I think the mentality on the mound is the most important thing. Just being able to attack hitters is the biggest thing. Just being fearless, basically. Not being afraid to get hit."

—NICK PIECORO

Patrick Forbes RHP, D-backs

Southisene Stands Out For Freedom In The Box

The Braves pulled a mild shocker in the first round when they selected Nevada high school shortstop **Tate Southisene** at No. 22 overall.

Now, the Basic High graduate gets his first full season to prove Atlanta's faith was warranted.

Southisene hit .495 with nine home runs to claim his state's Gatorade player of the year award while leading his team to a Nevada state title.

The Braves adored his aggressive approach at the plate and saw a propensity for making contact and room for more power as he fills out.

"A little unorthodox how he does it, but we love the freedom he plays with, especially in the batter's box," Braves vice president of amateur scouting **Ronit Shah** said.

Southisene, whose older brother **Ty** is a Cubs prospect who played at Low-A Myrtle Beach last season, has drawn comparisons to Angels shortstop **Zach Neto**—he has a similar leg kick—and Shah concurred that was fair.

The 5-foot-11, 180-pound Southisene can also play the outfield. The Braves like his athleticism, the ease with which he moves and his baserunning. They laud his IQ.

For his part, Southisene is blunt in his self-assessment: "Hitting is the thing that's going to get me to the big leagues."

Baseball America ranked him as the No. 43 prospect for the 2025 draft, so the Braves were a bit higher on him. Southisene himself said that he felt there were other interested teams in the first round.

Southisene appeared in 15 games for Low-A Augusta last summer, going 14-for-64 (.219) with four extra-base hits and three stolen bases. He drew one walk against 27 strikeouts.

It was a valuable first taste of pro ball. The Braves will get a real idea of where Southisene stands in the months and years ahead.

—GABE BURNS

Wing Takes Flight On The Mound

For years, **Kaleb Wing** had been limited to playing the infield due to his undersized frame.

On the 2024 summer showcase circuit, a late high school growth spurt added new life to Wing's tools. At tryouts for the Area Code Games, he threw harder from shortstop during infield drills than he ever had.

His invitation to the second round of tryouts brought an unexpected surprise: He was asked to get on the mound.

"It was pretty crazy to me, because I had never pitched before," Wing said. "It was a shock, but I love this game and I want to continue to play it at the highest possible level.

"And if these evaluators are telling me that my best avenue may be on the mound, then I'm going to try and pick it up."

Those evaluators were clearly onto something.

A year later, Wing was drafted by the Cubs in the fourth round as a righthander out of Scotts Valley High in California.

This winter has been Wing's first solely focusing on pitching and just his second preparing to pitch at all.

It surely helps that Wing's father **Ryan** was a professional pitcher who reached Triple-A in 2008.

"Although he just started pitching in the last year or so, you don't get the impression that he's behind in any way," Cubs scouting director **Dan Kantrovitz** said.

"While he's got plenty to still figure out, he's a really thoughtful, smart, curious kid who is mature beyond his years."

Since Wing signed, the Cubs have focused on adding calories and muscle to his 6-foot-2 frame during two offseason camps at their Arizona complex.

Compared with pre-draft testing, he has added about 20 pounds, weight that is designed to help him handle the rigors of pitching a full season.

"I haven't spent a lot of time on the mound," he said, "and I think finding a consistent delivery that allows me to command my stuff is going to be the biggest piece."

—BRYAN SMITH

NORM HALL/MLB PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES (KING), EDDIE KELLY (FORBES)

Improved Timing At Plate Helps Sanchez Produce

The Reds made Dominican outfielder **Adolfo Sanchez** the focal point of their 2024 international signing class.

The 6-foot-1 lefthanded hitter struggled in his pro debut in the Dominican Summer League, batting .216 with two home runs and a 34% strikeout rate in 45 games.

That's when Sanchez went to work to make some changes to get ready for 2025.

"He bought in and worked really hard on the changes that we were looking to help him make," Reds senior director of player development **Jeremy Farrell** said.

"It really came down to getting on time more consistently and cleaning up his move to the ball to allow him to be more consistent to ultimately put the ball in play and impact the ball like we think he has a chance to."

Cincinnati kept Sanchez in the Dominican Summer League in 2025. After having trouble making contact in his debut season, he cut his strikeout rate to 13.6%. He even walked (24) more often than he struck out (21) in 36 games.

While he made significantly more contact in 2025, he improved in plenty of other areas as well. He did a much better job of using the entire field and finished the year with a line of .339/.474/.504 and two homers.

In 2024, 48% of Sanchez's batted balls to outfielders were fielded by the right fielder. That dropped to 36% in 2025.

When the ball stayed on the infield in 2024, 76% of his batted balls were fielded by the first or second baseman, but that figure was just 55% in 2025.

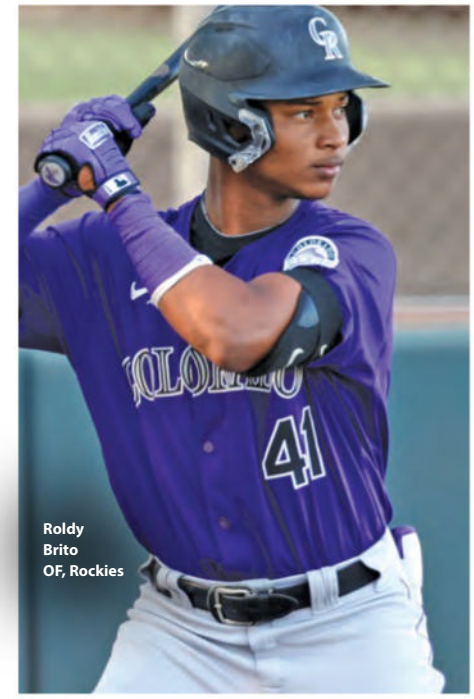
Sanchez receives an "incomplete" for the season after suffering a season-ending knee injury in late July, just as he was about to head to Arizona to participate in unofficial bridge league games.

"It was all really positive prior to the injury, and he was on his way to come over here (to Arizona) to play before that (injury) happened," Farrell said.

—DOUG GRAY

Brito Exhibits Table-Setter Skills For Rockies

Roldy Brito hit .371 last season. He stole 35 bases in 84 games. And the middle infielder learned to play center field in a season split between the Arizona Complex League and Low-A Fresno.



Roldy Brito
OF, Rockies

What does he have in store for an encore as a 19-year-old?

The dynamic Brito is a switch-hitter with double-plus speed. He won the ACL batting title and the league's MVP award. He didn't skip a beat at Low-A Fresno.

"He'll knock in his share of runs," said High-A Spokane bench coach **Tom Sutaris**, who worked with Brito in instructional league, "but I see him really as a true table-setter. I just think he's going to be an on-base machine.

"He's so young. He's got so much to learn. But I think his ceiling is off the charts."

A second baseman by trade, Brito will continue playing that position, which he does very well, along with center field, where he began playing last year to take full advantage of his speed.

Fresno bench coach **Dave Keller** said: "He played center field with no fear . . . And he has that attitude where it's like, 'Hit it out here so I can catch it, because I'm going to.' "

Home runs likely will be limited for Brito, who is 5-foot-11, 183 pounds. While not big, he's sturdy and makes authoritative contact.

"He wasn't afraid to bunt for hits," Keller said. "He wasn't afraid to slug bunt. He loved being a multi-dimensional threat in the box, not just somebody who slaps the ball the other way. He was driving balls."

Brito tried hitting for power in 2024 in the Dominican Summer League and managed a line of just .254/.360/.314.

In 2025, Brito played to his strengths and produced a .959 OPS.

"And he essentially takes off," assistant farm director **Jesse Stender** said. "I think more than anything, it's the self-belief, the confidence in himself. He truly believes he's the best player on the field."

—JACK ETKIN

George Holds His Own In Crowded Outfield

Kendall George did something in 2025 that just three other minor league players have done in the past 20 years.

The 21-year-old center fielder stole 100 bases—including 34 in August alone—in 111 games for High-A Great Lakes.

He joined **Billy Hamilton** (2011 and 2012), **Delino DeShields Jr.** (2012) and **Chandler Simpson** (2024) in the century club over the past two decades.

"I think it speaks just to the talent level that's there," Dodgers GM **Brandon Gomes** said of the 2023 first-round pick out of high school in Texas.

"When we took him where we did, our thought was, 'This is an 80-runner and an incredible athlete, and we're going to take our time and let the bat play out.' I think where we sit today, it's been pretty damn good."

George is a lefthanded batter who hit .295/.409/.370 with a 16% walk rate, albeit with just 19 extra-base hits. Almost all of his power comes versus righthanders.

"I think you have obviously elite-of-the-elite speed, a good foundation of decision-making and the ability to conduct an at-bat," Gomes said. "There's some things in the swing we want to continue to push and work on.

"That's going to be the goal, along with really, really pushing his center field defense and making sure he is a plus defender, as we know he can be."

George has plenty of company in the grass. The Dodgers' top four prospects are outfielders: **Eduardo Quintero**, **Josue De Paula**, **Mike Sirota** and **Zyhir Hope**.

"He's right in there," Gomes said. "I think it's an interesting group. Each guy has his own individual skill set.

"Kendall, obviously, with his 80-speed and bat-to-ball versus righthanders and then his center field play, he's a little more your old-school type player."

—BILL PLUNKETT

Defrank Is Dedicated To Becoming Great

Before he ever signed with the Marlins, righthander **Kevin Defrank** learned how to throw his slider by watching **Sandy Alcantara** on YouTube.

The 17-year-old Defrank, who, like Alcantara, is a native of the Dominican Republic, was throwing a 94 mph fastball when he signed with the Marlins for $560,000 in January 2025.

That looks like money well spent after Defrank topped out near 100 mph in the Dominican Summer League. He struck out 34 batters in 31 innings while recording a 3.19 ERA in 10 starts.

"I'm not satisfied," Defrank said in Spanish when asked about his offseason ranking of No. 5 in the Marlins' system. "The higher I get ranked, the higher I want to go."

Defrank won't turn 18 until August but already is listed at 6-foot-5, 235 pounds. He said that doctors have told him he will grow to 6-foot-7.

That evokes comparisons with another extra-tall Marlins righty. Six-foot-8 **Eury Perez** made his MLB debut at age 20 in 2023.

Defrank will report to Jupiter, Fla., in February. It will be his first season in the U.S.

Defrank will continue to work on his high-leg-kick delivery and his arsenal that is centered on a four-seam fastball, sweepy slider and outstanding changeup.

Marlins Latin American complex pitching coordinator **Royce Carlton** predicts that Defrank will have his "coming-out party" in 2026 and that his prospect stock will soar even higher.

Carlton said Defrank is dedicated to becoming great.

"In season, he'll text me at night when he should be sleeping," Carlton said. "He's constantly asking me pitching questions.

"Kevin is also a young leader. He holds his teammates accountable, and he wants the challenge of facing the best hitters."

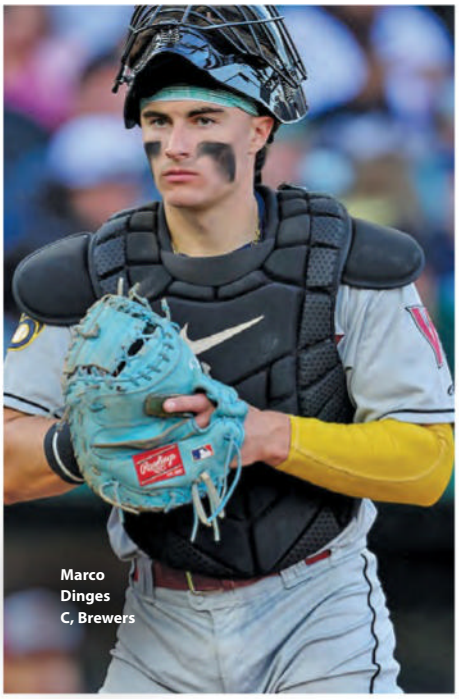
—WALTER VILLA

Dinges Swings Hard And Gets Results

At 5-foot-10, 195 pounds, **Marco Dinges** isn't going to wow anyone physically.

The way he swings the bat? That's a different story.

"His bat speed is off the charts," Brewers assistant director of player development **Brenton Del Chiaro** said. "It's one of the best—if not the best—in our organization.



Marco Dinges C, Brewers

"And what that does is it allows him to drive the ball out of the ballpark to all fields."

The Brewers drafted Dinges in the fourth round in 2024 out of Florida State. The 22-year-old is a righthanded-hitting catcher who appeared in 47 games at the position in 2025, while serving as DH in another 30.

Dinges batted .300/.416/.514 with 13 home runs for Low-A Carolina and High-A Wisconsin. He was one of seven minor league catchers to top a .900 OPS while batting at least 300 times.

A badly strained hamstring led to him missing a large chunk of time and never being fully right late in the season.

Opposing pitchers learned quickly that Dinges does damage at the plate.

Del Chiaro said that Dinges' bat speed has topped out at 85 mph in training and sits around 75 in games. Those are major league-caliber readings.

Dinges has been letting it rip at the plate for a long time.

"I've always swung pretty violently," he said. "I was pretty undersized when I went to junior college and I've always had the same swing—I just didn't have the strength. Then, once the strength got added, the results started showing.

"I never really struck out that much, so I was like, 'Why not?' That's how I felt about it."

Defensively, Dinges possesses a strong arm and is athletic for a catcher but needs to continue to log game reps with game-calling and pitch-framing as focal points.

—TODD ROSIAK

Velocity Boost Helps Put Gomez On The Map

In some ways, lefthander **Franklin Gomez** is an atypical prospect.

For one, the Venezuela signee made his pro debut while still just 16 years old. For another, he had a better feel for his pitches than most hurlers his age.

That precociousness allowed Gomez to climb from the Dominican Summer League in 2022 to full-season ball by the end of 2023, when he made one September start for Low-A St. Lucie.

Still, there was one thing holding Gomez back: He lacked the velocity of his peers.

"A lot of young guys are chasing velocity," Mets pitching coordinator **Kyle Rogers** said. "Franklin was kind of the inverse of that.

"He came to the States at a very young age . . . (and) had the ability to pitch super competitively, but he kind of just lacked velo."

That reality began to change in 2025, when Gomez upped his four-seam fastball velocity by about 3 mph, going from an average of 89-90 in 2024 to 92-93 a year later.

The improvement was intentional, and the speed of his cutter, changeup, two-seamer and slider also came along for the ride.

For a few years, the Mets had waited for Gomez's velocity to increase with physical maturation. When those gains did not materialize, they changed their tack.

Midway through 2025 spring training, Rogers and Mets introduced Gomez to a higher-intensity throwing program to try to coax more velocity. This included work with weighted plyometric balls combined with the intent to throw harder during side sessions.

In concert with that, the Mets spaced out Gomez's appearances.

"We told him, 'You're going to go out there and let it fly' " Rogers said. "We saw a velo uptick that way. Over time, we closed the gaps between his outings and started to build up his pitch count."

Gomez worked in a piggyback arrangement at St. Lucie in which he threw about 50 pitches per outing. He ended the 2025 season with six starts for High-A Brooklyn, where his pitch count climbed as high as 79.

In 71.2 total innings, Gomez struck out 68, walked 34 and pitched to a 2.76 ERA. He allowed just two home runs.

His velocity diminished slightly late in the season at High-A, though he finished strong with seven scoreless playoff innings.

—MATT EDDY

BILL MITCHELL (BRITO), MIKE JANES/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (DINGES)

McCambley Could Make Opening Day Bullpen

The Phillies believe that 26-year-old **Zach McCambley** has a chance to impact their major league bullpen this season.

The 6-foot-2 righthander spent five seasons in the Marlins organization before the Phillies selected him in December's Rule 5 draft.

Over 62 innings last year between Double-A and Triple-A, McCambley posted a 2.90 ERA and a 1.10 WHIP. He struck out 33% of batters.

One key reason for his success was halving his walk rate from 18% in 2024 to about 9% last season.

But what appealed most to the Phillies was McCambley's effectiveness against righthanded hitters. He held them to a .186 average.

A major reason for that is his slider. The offering has more than 15 inches of horizontal movement and misses a lot of barrels, with a 50.7% whiff rate and 18.2% hard-hit rate in 2025.

McCambley also throws a cutter and a fastball that sits 94 mph and tops out around 96.

"He's got a starter background. He's been in the bullpen," Phillies director of professional scouting **Mike Ondo** said. "But he's just someone who has some versatility to maybe log some innings, pitch short, whatever they might need him to do."

"But to really kind of get in there and get him on a pocket of righthanded hitters, I think is really what we're hoping where some big value is."

If McCambley doesn't break camp with the Phillies, he will be placed on waivers. If he clears, he has to be offered back to the Marlins, according to Rule 5 regulations.

The Phillies haven't had a Rule 5 pick make the Opening Day roster under current president of baseball operations **Dave Dombrowski**, who was hired in 2020.

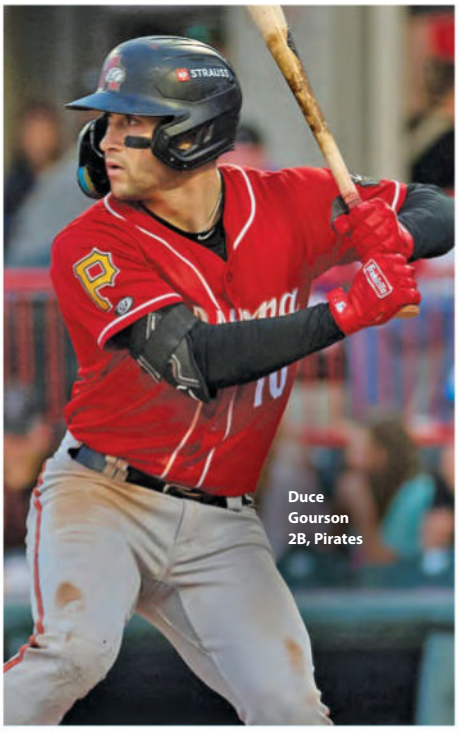
But the Phillies have reasons to be optimistic about McCambley's chances.

"He's a little bit different, because he's in a spot where he has to make the club," Dombrowski said. "But when we drafted him, we had the feeling that he could make the team."

—LOCHLAHN MARCH

Gourson Grinds His Way To Double-A

Second baseman **Duce Gourson** hit the ground running after the Pirates drafted him in the 2024 ninth round out of UCLA.



Duce Gourson 2B, Pirates

He reached High-A Greensboro for 11 games during his draft year and then climbed to Double-A in late-June 2025.

In the process, he became the first player from the Pirates' 2024 draft class to reach Altoona.

Gourson started slowly in the Eastern League, batting .183 and slugging .280 through his first 28 games at the new level.

"He understands what the game is telling him," Pirates farm director **Michael Chernow** said. "The first 100 plate appearances probably weren't great in Double-A. He's seeing better stuff than he's seen in his life . . .

"A year prior, he was still in college."

Once Gourson adjusted, it was a completely different look. In his final 28 games for Altoona, the 23-year-old posted a 1.030 OPS with four home runs and eight doubles.

On the season, Gourson batted .275/.370/.439 in 95 games. He hit 10 homers and stole 31 bases, the latter being something that Chernow attributes to more than raw speed.

"He is such a gamer," Chernow said. "He's a winning baseball player. He's not an elite speed type, and then you look and see a 93% stolen base rate with 30-plus bags."

Chernow also mentioned that while Gourson may not stand out immediately for raw tools, by the end of a scout's weeklong look, he will have made several key plays to help his team win.

"He's just a really strong situational baseball player," Chernow said of Gourson, who also brings the versatility to play third base and first base.

"He's going to find a way to achieve whatever he wants to achieve, and the more of those guys that we have, the better."

—ANTHONY MURPHY

Aita Works To Expand Repertoire

Among the armful of young pitchers the Cardinals acquired via trade this offseason were two future rotation hopefuls who arrived from the Red Sox in separate deals.

One is high-ceiling lefthander **Brandon Clarke** from the **Sonny Gray** trade.

The other is 22-year-old righthander **Blake Aita**, a product of the **Willson Contreras** deal, who brings intriguing ingredients for the team's updated and expanded pitching development apparatus to amplify.

And he has already started that process.

Aita logged 115.1 innings for Boston's Class A affiliates last season, one year after being drafted in the sixth round out of Kennesaw State.

At the time of the trade, Aita was deep into the Red Sox's offseason plan for him when he found out he'd be switching shades of red. He spent his first pro season chasing new pitches, including a splitter, and crisper pitch shapes.

"So, I got kind of east and west with the changeup, the sweeper, the cutter and then I also have the curveball and the fastball to go north to south," Aita said.

"I had to learn how to get away from being that east-west pitcher and only good against righties. Now I can get both (sides of the plate) out and work east, west, north, and south for whatever I need to do."

Aita, pronounced "eye-dah," recorded a 3.98 ERA in 23 games (19 starts) in 2025. He struck out a total of 99 in 115.1 innings.

He described how there were moments when he prioritized pitch use—drilling on a specific pitch, regardless of count or situation—over trying for the strikeout.

A goal for this season is putting his new pitch mix together with an approach that will exploit his feel for spin and yield more strikeouts.

The next step after landing new pitches for Aita is missing bats.

"I'm good at making the ball move, and I'm really good at spinning the ball," Aita said. "My issue in college is I never had a changeup or anything to use against lefties. I think that is going to be a big thing for me next year. "

—DERRICK GOOLD

Padres Sign Song After 'Unique' KBO Journey

Playing in MLB was the furthest thing from **Sung-Mun Song's** mind after his 2023 season in Korea.

The third baseman had just posted a sub-.700 OPS for a third straight season in the KBO, while **Ha-Seong Kim** had just finished his third MLB season with the Padres.

"If I would not have made any progress the last two years," Song said through interpreter **Sam Jeong**, "this would have been a press conference for me to announce that I'm retiring."

The progress was real enough for the Padres to guarantee the 29-year-old Song $15 million over the next four seasons.

It began with improvements in weight training and nutrition. Song also hunkered down with a hitting coach who helped him with balance, pull-side power and the ability to handle the sort of fastballs that seem to slow Koreans' transition to MLB.

Suddenly, Song popped 19 home runs for Kiwoom in 2024 and followed that with 26 more in 2025, a season in which he batted .315/.387/.530 with 25 stolen bases and 37 doubles in 144 games.

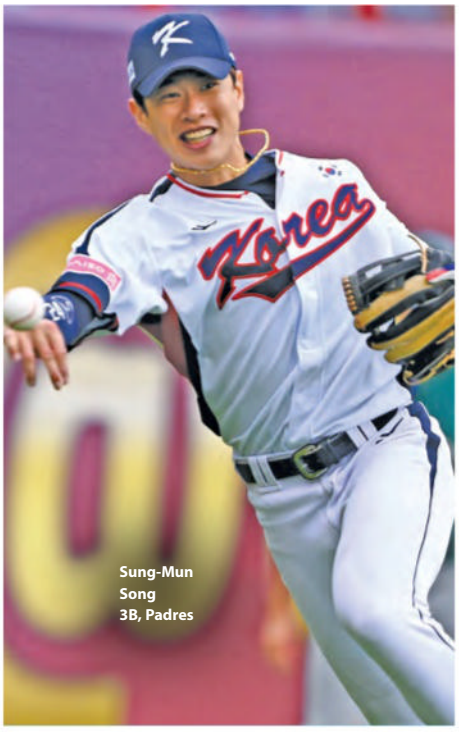
That encouraged Song to pursue an MLB career. The Padres were ultimately the team that came calling, agreeing to a deal shortly before his posting window closed in December.

San Diego envisions that Song will begin his stay in San Diego as a utility player who bounces between second, third and first base—and maybe even the outfield.

"He's been a very exciting player for us to scout and eventually sign," Padres president of baseball operations **A.J. Preller** said. "His progression in the KBO the last two seasons has been a very unique journey . . .

"He's somebody who can impact the game on both sides of the ball, offensively and defensively. He's been a very productive hitter in the KBO who can control the strike zone, make really quality contact easily and can impact the ball."

—JEFF SANDERS



Sung-Mun Song
3B, Padres

Harber Impresses With Post-Trade Production

Although **Parks Harber** hit 20 home runs and compiled a 1.073 OPS as a North Carolina senior in 2024, he went undrafted and signed with the Yankees.

But as the calendar turns to 2026, Harber is no afterthought in the Giants' organization. San Francisco acquired Harber from New York in the **Camilo Doval** deal at the 2025 trade deadline.

The 24-year-old third baseman thrived with both High-A Eugene and in the Arizona Fall League.

"He's a rare blend, and I think that's where he's a separator," Giants farm director **Kyle Haines** said. "He has power to all fields, but it's not his power you talk about.

"It's the blend—his ability to hit a lot of different pitch types to a lot of different fields. He's a hitter first and a power hitter second."

In 25 games for Eugene, the righthanded-hitting Harber belted seven homers and had a 1.097 OPS. In 17 AFL games, Harber went deep three times and had a 1.196 OPS.

Listed at 6-foot-3, 225 pounds, Harber played both corner infield spots in college, his first three seasons at Georgia followed by one at UNC.

Haines believes Harber could be an everyday third baseman, but the Giants have **Matt Chapman** ensconced at third and likely will have **Rafael Devers** and/or **Bryce Eldridge** at first for the foreseeable future.

Harber also has spent a bit of time as a corner outfielder.

Haines said the Giants plan to make Harber ready to play any position that could help the team.

Harber isn't the only Giants prospect who went undrafted. Outfielder **Bo Davidson** also wasn't selected in the 20 rounds; the Giants signed him in July 2023 after he attended junior college in North Carolina.

"I think it's a good lesson that there are still plenty of good players out there, and it's a credit to (Harber) for not giving up," Haines said. "He didn't become discouraged. If anything, he used that as motivation.

"We found Bo Davidson and others, and a lot of teams across baseball have learned that the value doesn't stop when the rounds stop."

—STEVE KRONER

King Benefits From Simpler Approach In AFL

Shortstop **Seaver King**, the 10th overall pick in 2024, heads into 2026 with increased confidence after his performance in the Arizona Fall League.

"After a lackluster-ish year, it was great having a blank slate against the best competition," King said.

Playing for Scottsdale, the 22-year-old simplified his approach and his swing as he hit .359/.468/.563 in 18 games.

He took what had been his two-strike setup with no stride and used it far more often in his plate appearances. King earned a roster spot in the AFL's Fall Stars Game.

"I saw the results by not worrying about the results," King said. "I still used my 'A' swing with no stride, but it was more intent-based. Mentally, I was more able to repeat what I was doing well."

In the regular minor league season last year, King played at High-A Wilmington and Double-A Harrisburg. In 125 games he hit .244/.294/.337 with six home runs. He stole 30 bases in 34 tries and was selected by the organization as the system's baserunner of the year.

King's bat carried him to success at Division II Wingate in North Carolina, with USA Baseball's Collegiate National Team and then at Wake Forest, but he had to rely on other tools for much of last season.

He called his 2025 minor league season "a complete learning process."

The 6-foot righthanded hitter had success in his first taste of pro ball at Low-A Fredericksburg following the 2024 draft—he helped them win a Carolina League championship—but the going was tougher at his two stops in 2025.

"Something I had to learn was that I can affect the game in a lot of ways," King said. "I've improved my defense and really worked at running the bases."

—LACY LUSK

MIKE JANES/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (GOURSON), GENE WANG/GETTY IMAGES (SONG)

In Memoriam

RANDY JONES WAS A PADRES FIXTURE FOR DECADES

Lefthander Randy Jones won the first Cy Young Award in Padres franchise history, and the SoCal native remained affiliated with the club his entire life as an ambassador.

San Diego drafted Jones out of Division II Chapman in the fifth round in 1972. He rocketed to the majors the next season for the fifth-year Padres and pitched to a 3.16 ERA in 139.1 innings.

Jones ascended to all-star status in 1975, when he finished second in Cy Young Award voting by going 20-12 with a National League-leading 2.24 ERA in 285 innings. He won the award in 1976 when he tossed 315.1 innings, completed 25 games and went 22-14 with a 2.74 ERA.

Jones combined to toss 600 innings at ages 25 and 26—his 2.50 ERA in that time translated to a 135 ERA+—but would never again scale those heights. He suffered a nerve injury in his arm during his final start of 1976 and had surgery. When he returned in 1977, Jones threw 147.1 innings and was hit hard for a 4.58 ERA and 1.42 WHIP.

Jones was never a power pitcher. Instead he leaned on a sinker and slider to generate early-count groundball contact. He struck out just 9% of batters for his career, one of the lowest figures for a starter with at least 1,000 innings in the expansion era.

The Padres traded Jones to the Mets after the 1980 season. He spent two seasons in New York before retiring in spring 1983 after he went to camp with the Pirates. Jones went 100-123 with a 3.42 ERA in 1,933 career innings. He struck out 735, walked 503 and induced 209 groundball double plays—one every nine innings on average.

Jones operated a number of charities and businesses in San Diego after his playing career, the most famous being Randy Jones BBQ, which remains a popular concession stand at Petco Park.

Jones died on Nov. 18. He was 75.

MIKE CAMPBELL BROKE INTO MLB WITH HOMETOWN MARINERS

The Mariners didn't have a winning season from their inception in 1977 until 1991. Consequently, they had many high draft picks.

Mike Campbell was one of those picks. The Mariners drafted him seventh overall in 1985 out of the University of Hawaii, but the 6-foot-3 righthander was actually a local product who played high school ball in the Seattle suburb of Bellevue.

Campbell thrived at Triple-A Calgary in 1987, winning the Pacific Coast League's MVP award after going 15-2 with a 2.66 ERA in 162.2 innings. He made his MLB debut on July 4, 1987, and drifted between Calgary and Seattle for three seasons before his 1989 move to the Montreal Expos to complete the deal that brought Randy Johnson to Seattle and sent Mark Langston to Montreal.

Campbell never pitched for the Expos and was traded to the White Sox after 1990 spring training. He would go on to pitch in the Brewers, Rangers, Padres, Cubs and Red Sox organizations before heading to Japan in 1997.

An injury precluded Campbell from pitching that year and exacted a toll on his entire playing career. He made 51 big league appearances over a span of six MLB seasons between 1987 and 1996. His 5.86 ERA was about 25% below league average, the product of allowing 1.7 home runs per nine innings.

He pitched 12 seasons and 1,075 innings in the minor leagues.

Campbell died of a heart attack on Dec. 15. He was 61. ■

TOM HICKS HELPED ELEVATE RANGERS

Former Rangers owner Tom Hicks died on Dec. 5. He was 79.

Hicks was a private equity investor based in Dallas who first bought the NHL's Dallas Stars in 1995 and then the Rangers in 1998.

The Stars won the Stanley Cup in 1999 and finished as runners-up in 2000. The Rangers reached their first World Series until 2010, months after Hicks had sold the franchise to satisfy his creditors.

Hicks is best known as the owner who personally negotiated with agent Scott Boras to sign Alex Rodriguez to his record-shattering 10-year, $252 million contract for the 2001 season.

A-Rod thrived in Texas, but the Rangers did not win, which prompted his trade to the Yankees for the 2004 season.

In a press release announcing Hicks' death, the Rangers described him as "a passionate and competitive owner and Texas Rangers fan. The club extends its thoughts and prayers to Mr. Hicks' wife Cinda, his six children and his entire family as they mourn a legendary Texas businessman, philanthropist, and sportsman." ■.

In Memoriam

compiled by MATT EDDY

LONGTIME COACH MILANO LEFT MARK ON CAL BASEBALL

Bob Milano, the winningest head coach in University of California baseball history, died on Nov. 1 from complications from Alzheimer's disease. He was 85.

Milano was a catcher for the Bears in 1960 and '61 and he led the team in hitting with a .357 average in 1960. In his 22 seasons (1978-99) running the Cal program, the Bears went 688-644-4, qualified for regionals six times and made it to the College World Series in three years: 1980, '88 and '92.

He was known to a large segment of the Cal baseball community simply as "7," the number he wore as head coach. It's one of four retired numbers in program history.

Giants manager Bob Melvin was a backup catcher on that 1980 team that finished third in the CWS. Melvin fondly recalled Milano's recruiting visit to Melvin's Menlo Park home in the late 1970s. Melvin said Milano, true to the catching fraternity, got down on his knees to block Nerf balls.

Melvin also remembered how strongly Milano's affection for the university came across during the recruiting visit.

"The minute he walked in that door, I could feel the passion that he had for Cal and it resonated with me," Melvin said. "I know when he walked out, I told my parents, 'I want to go to Cal,' and it was because of Bob Milano."

Because Melvin didn't play a ton as the lone freshman on the '80 team, he spent a lot of time on the bench, picking Milano's brain.

"I was in his ear all year," Melvin said. "And now when I'm managing, I think about the times and the talks that we had . . . Just the questions about, 'Why are you doing this? Why are they doing that?', that have been so impactful for me."

Among the more prominent big leaguers during Milano's tenure were first baseman Kevin Maas, Gold Glove-winning outfielder Darren Lewis, catcher Jerry Goff (the father of former Cal quarterback Jared Goff, now with the Detroit Lions), Hall of Fame second baseman Jeff Kent, third baseman Geoff Blum, outfielder Xavier Nady and reliever Tyler Walker.

Milano grew up in Oakland and went to Bishop O'Dowd High. In youth baseball, he played with and against the likes of Curt Flood, Joe Morgan, Vada Pinson and Willie Stargell.

After his playing days at Cal ended, he worked as an assistant coach before spending several years as the head baseball coach at Burlingame High. Milano returned to Cal in the early 1970s and was an assistant coach for Jackie Jensen and an assistant athletic director for four years prior to taking over the baseball program ahead of the 1978 season.

Milano was an assistant coach for Team USA when it won gold in the 1988 Seoul Olympics and the head coach of the U.S. national team in 1997. Milano was inducted into the American Baseball Coaches Hall of Fame in 2010.

Said Melvin: "There are just so many things about Bob Milano that have impacted where I am right now. He's a special man." ■

—Steve Kroner

OVERLOOKED RELIEVER DAVE GIUSTI THRIVED WITH PIRATES

Righthander Dave Giusti earned Cy Young Award votes in three seasons, made an all-star team and served as closer for the World Series-champion 1971 Pirates.

All those accolades followed a fitful start to his pro career.

The Houston Colt .45s signed Giusti in 1961 following a successful run at Syracuse, back when it had a baseball program. He pitched in the College World Series in 1961 and reached the majors the following season for the first-year Houston franchise.

Giusti worked as a starter for Houston through the 1968 season, posting a 4.02 ERA in 913 innings. Playing home games in the pitcher-friendly Astrodome during an extreme pitcher's era meant that his ERA translated to just an 82 ERA+.

Giusti pitched for the Cardinals in 1969, making more than half his appearances as a reliever to hint at his future role. Traded to the Pirates after the season, he embarked on the most successful run of his career.

From 1970 to 1975, Giusti led MLB with 127 saves. Only Mike Marshall made more appearances. Giusti ranked top 10 among relievers in strikeouts, innings and fWAR.

Giusti finished fourth in National League Cy Young Award voting in 1970—and sixth in MVP voting—when he saved 26 games with a 3.06 ERA over 103 innings. He led the NL with 30 saves in 1971 and added three more in the postseason, throwing 10.2 scoreless innings for the World Series-champion Pirates.

Giusti played a key role for Pirates teams that won the NL East five times in six seasons between 1970 and 1975. He was an all-star in 1973 and received CYA votes that season and also in 1974.

Giusti's effectiveness took a downturn in 1976, and he finished his career with a mediocre final season for the Athletics and Cubs in 1977. He settled in the Pittsburgh area after his career.

Largely forgotten today, Giusti was one of the most effective relievers during the first half of the 1970s. He died at age 86 on Jan. 11. ■

DIAMOND IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (JONES), FOCUS ON SPORT VIA GETTY IMAGES (GIUSTI), LARRY GOREN/ICON SMI/ICON SPORT MEDIA VIA GETTY IMAGES (HICKS), LARRY GOREN/FOUR SEAM IMAGES (MILANO)

PERSPECTIVE

CHANTICLEER AS DAY

Coastal Carolina's athletic department emphasizes baseball, showing the way forward for mid-majors

J.J. COOPER
@JJCOOP36

As someone who loves college baseball, I worry that in many ways it is too close to where college football was a few years ago.

In the era before NIL and transfers, Alabama, plus a rotating cast of Clemson, Ohio State and Georgia began each season with a level of talent that kept everyone else at arm's length.

From 2015 to 2023, those four schools filled 15 of the 18 slots in the college football national championship games. Other than LSU's title in 2020, the other eight championships were won by those four schools. Titles rotated among the group, but the rest of college football was not involved.

Those days are gone now, and college football has seen many more teams become competitive. Indiana can compete for titles, while the champions of a few years ago are finding the landscape much more competitive.

College baseball isn't a sport in which one team—or a handful—can dominate like that in the 21st century. But when it comes to titles, the Southeastern Conference has slapped a trademark on the championship dog pile in Omaha.

It's been eight years since a non-SEC school has won a national title—that would be Oregon State in 2018—and eight of the last nine trophies are on display at SEC schools. There's a solid chance that the SEC will go 9-for-10 in 2026. If that happens, the SEC will equal the Pacific-12 Conference—and its previous iterations—with 24 CWS titles.

Remarkably, the then-Pac-10 had 18 titles before the SEC won its first in 1990. Since then, the SEC has won 23 of the past 35 College World Series.

The SEC has dominated the sport for much of the 21st century, and in doing so it has shown that the sport can draw fans at levels that rival that of top minor league clubs. That makes the sport a much bigger part of the spring campus experience in Starkville, Baton Rouge or Knoxville than it is around most of the country.

Many mid-major coaches will tell you that their schools are playing a different game—one in which fundraising is all about keeping the program going. Meanwhile, the top college teams are operating like pro clubs and paying top talent to come to their school and train at MLB-caliber facilities.

But that's not the full picture. Because as much as I may worry about the SEC hogging all the dog piles, there are plenty of signs out there that schools outside of the SEC can succeed in college baseball in 2026.

Coastal Carolina is showing how it can be done. The Chanticleers finished runner-up to LSU in Omaha last June, coming just short of a second title for the school in the past decade. Oregon State made it to Omaha as an independent. Murray State also finished its amazing run with a spot in Omaha.

Coastal Carolina not only built a CWS team in 2025, but it also held onto ace Cameron Flukey and No. 2 starter Hayden Johnson. The Chanticleers have the type of rotation that could pave their way for a return to Omaha.

How do they do it? Coastal Carolina has decided to emphasize college baseball in its athletics program. While it is more expensive than it used to be, it's also much less expensive than trying to compete in college football or men's basketball. By putting resources into baseball, Coastal Carolina has been rewarded.

Preseason No. 1 UCLA is another example of a less traditional path to success. In an era in which teams restock their roster each year via the transfer portal, coach John Savage has stuck with recruiting freshmen and developing them.

When you land players like shortstop Roch Cholowsky and first baseman Mulivai Levu, that approach can still work—even if UCLA doesn't have the facilities to compare to many of the other schools in the preseason top 10, six of whom play in the SEC.

Pitchers such as Hayden Johnson help Coastal Carolina punch above its weight

Southern Miss, ranked No. 23 in the preseason, has shown that it can develop players year after year and have parlayed that talent into nine straight NCAA Tournament appearances. East Carolina, ranked No. 24, has shown that it can bring in top-tier talent and contend season after season. It boasts eight straight tournament appearances and four super regional appearances over that stretch.

The problem for many college athletics programs is deciding where to put their resources. College baseball isn't going to always win those arguments, but there are plenty of examples of the potential payoff. Find the right coach, connect with fans in a way that gets them excited about the program, and a college baseball team can not only be a key part of the campus experience, but it also can become a team that blossoms.

Is it harder to compete in 2026 than it was in 1996? Absolutely. But it's not impossible, as schools like Coastal Carolina are demonstrating. College baseball is a sport where a couple of dominant pitchers can help the underdog punch above its weight.

For schools that decide to make the effort, becoming competitive in baseball continues to be less expensive and more obtainable than it is in other high-profile sports, even if making that sales pitch to athletics directors remains a tough task. ■

ISAIAH VAZQUEZ/GETTY IMAGES

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